

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 32:1-35
“Please Forgive Them”

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Exodus 32:1-35

Verse 1

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

- Moses had been on the mountain in conversation with God for forty days. During this time, the Israelites became restless and confused.
- Having lived in the culture of Egypt for generations, the people were confused about the nature of God. They were used to having idols to worship. They were used to having visual representations of their gods before them. So they came to Aaron and demanded that he create such an image for them to worship.
- Despite all that they had seen on their journey out of Egypt and the important role that Moses had played in securing their freedom from Pharaoh, in view of his long absence, the people dismissed Moses as lost to them and unimportant to their future. They showed no loyalty to Moses at all.

Verse 2-4

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.”

- Aaron, the High Priest Elect, was more than willing to comply with the peoples’ demands. He offers no objection to their suggestion but immediately sets out to comply with their demands.

- Aaron took a collection of gold earrings from the people and used these to make an idol in the shape of a calf for them to worship. It is important to notice that Aaron molds and shape this calf. He even uses a tool to finish it. It does not just appear out of the fire as Aaron later suggests. (See verse 24)
- The people declare that this golden calf is now their god. The people refer to the calf with plural pronouns to extend it an honored place, and they ascribe unto it the attributes if God -- they proclaim that this calf led them out of Egypt! (See Exodus 20:2)

Verse 5-6

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to YHWH.” So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

- When Aaron saw that his creation satisfied the people, he gave it the name of God. He called the calf YHWH. He then declared that the next day would be a feast day to celebrate this new god.
- The next day began with an early worship service. The people made sacred offerings to the calf-god. After worship there was a great feast. Following the supper, in worship of this new god, the Israelites indulged themselves. The Hebrew word implies that they engaged in an orgy to worship the calf-god.

Verse 7-10

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ I have seen these people”, YHWH said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

- As God was finishing the terms of the contract that he was intending to offer Israel through Moses, Israel had already broken the deal. They could not wait long enough to even hear God’s terms. God knew that this would happen even before it did. However, when it

did, as he revealed the people's actions to Moses, God's revealed terms also seem to change:

1. God no longer refers to Israel as his people. They are now Moses' people. God refuses to accept responsibility for even having secured their freedom. It is now Moses who led them out of Egypt. Because they have broken covenant with God by declaring their allegiance to another god, YHWH is casting them off. He will have no obligation to them.
 2. God declares that the people are "stiff-necked." This means that they are stubborn in their disobedience and will not listen to reason. They know who delivered them and have seen his mighty hand work to protect them. Still, they deny the truth and give an idol his name.
 3. God declares that he is angry enough with the nation of Israel to destroy it and he offers to give Moses' descendants Israel's place.
- Israel has failed to catch the great Exodus formula. She has heard the word of God but she has refused to do the will of God. Therefore she cannot receive the blessing of God.

Verse 11-16

But Moses sought the favor of YHWH his God. "O Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?' Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then YHWH relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

- Immediately, Moses interceded before God for the people of Israel. He pleaded with God not to destroy the nation. He reminded God that the Egyptians were watching what happened and would reach wrong conclusions if God destroyed Israel. He reminded God of the faithfulness of the patriarchs and of God's promises to them. Moses begged God not to destroy Israel.
- In so doing, Moses reveals his character as a man and a leader. He turns down God's offer to transfer the covenant promises to him personally and assumes the role of intercessor for the people in his

care. Moses shows himself to be possibly the only person alive who has understood the great formula. He is the one who listened to the word of God and obeyed the word of God.

- In response to Moses' prayer for Israel, God seems to change his mind. However that is not what happened. God does not change his mind. Instead, God used the situation to show the true character of Moses. Moses is fit to be Israel's leader because he listens and obeys, unlike Aaron and the rest of the nation. And God uses the situation to reveal his true character to Moses. Even though Israel deserves God's punishment, he shows himself to be forgiving. He does not give Israel what she deserves. He responds, not from justice, but from grace.

Verse 15-18

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp." Moses replied:

*"It is not the sound of victory,
It is not the sound of defeat;
It is the sound of singing that I hear."*

- Moses came down the mountain carrying in his hands the stone tablets upon which God had inscribed the covenant terms. This was the written form of the contract God was offering Israel actually written by the hand of God.
- Joshua had been waiting part way up the mountain for Moses to return. Hearing the noise of celebration coming from the camp below, Joshua thought that the people must have defeated some great foe.
- In response to Joshua's observation, Moses recites a poem. He tells Joshua that it is nothing more important than a party that caused the noise in the camp.

Verse 19-20

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

- When Moses saw what was happening in the camp, the people dancing around their calf-god, he became angry as had God. His anger burned within him because his heart was close to the heart of God.
- He threw the tablets of the Testimony, written by the hand of God, on the ground breaking them to pieces. This action symbolized that Israel had already broken the covenant God was about to offer. God's deal was removed from the table.
- Moses took the calf-god and through it into the fire. He then ground the calf-god to dust. This showed the powerlessness of this supposed god. It could not even defend itself against Moses. How could such a god lead a nation?
- Moses then sprinkled the dust of the calf-god over Israel's drinking water and demanded that the people drink the remains of their new god. This showed his helplessness and forced them to swallow responsibility for their own sin.

Verse 21

He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

- Moses demanded of Aaron to know how the people had threatened him to convince him to let them do what they had done. Moses lays responsibility on Aaron's shoulders because Aaron had been left in charge. It was his responsibility to keep the people from danger and sin since he was their leader.

Verse 22-24

"Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

- When confronted by Moses, Aaron's first words are very like the words Moses spoke to God in appeal for the people of Israel. He begs Moses, not to be angry with them. (See verse 11.) Aaron addresses Moses as "Lord." The word simply means, "Sir," in this context.
- Aaron's description of what happened and how events unfolded is very different from reality. Aaron's character is not like Moses'. He is unable to accept responsibility for his own actions.

Verse 25-26

Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for YHWH, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.

- Recognizing the serious implication of the situation and that the people of God were entirely out of control, Moses attempted to impose order on the camp. He called for the people to choose whom they would serve by calling all of those who would stand with God to come and stand by him.
- Of all the people of Israel only those of the tribe of Levi came to stand beside Moses in loyalty to God. All the others had forsaken God.
- One of the abiding principles of Scripture is that of the remnant. Whenever people rebel against God and refuse his covenant, there is always a remnant, a small group, which remains loyal to God. God always uses this faithful remnant to bring things back under his control.
- It is very important to hear Moses call to the people. God calls all people to join the remnant of the faithful ones. Those who reject the call of God do so as an act of their God-given free will. But they reject God’s offer at their own peril.

Verse 27-29

Then he said to them, “This is what YHWH, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to YHWH today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.”

- While God always acts in grace, giving each person the chance to choose to serve him, God’s judgment also falls upon those who reject him. So it is that having given them the opportunity to decide whom they will serve, God moves in judgment over Israel.
- 3,000 men refuse to recant of their sin in rebelling against God and were executed that day for their rebellion. The rest of Israel repented.
- Because the Levites acted in obedience to the call of God, they were granted special favor or blessing in God’s sight.

Verse 30

The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to YHWH; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

- Acting as their priest, Moses offers to go into YHWH’s presence to make atonement for the people’s sin. Again, this shows the great heart of Moses as a true leader. He will do all that he can do for the people God has put in his care.

Verse 31-32

So Moses went back to YHWH and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin -- but if not, blot me out of the book you have written.”

- Moses asks God to forgive Israel. He asks that if God will not forgive them, God credit their sin to his account and punish him in Israel’s place.

Verse 33-35

YHWH replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.” And YHWH struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

- God rejects Moses’ offer to take the place of the people in God’s judgment. YHWH declares that each person will be held accountable for his own sin.
- God then shows his compassion on Israel by instructing Moses to continue the journey to the Promised Land, and promises that his angel will lead the way.
- However, the consequences of their sinful actions in rebelling against God cannot be averted. Even though God’s heart is still with Israel, he allows her to suffer a plague.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Please Forgive Them*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)