

God Forgives

February 1, 2009

Purpose: To help us recognize that while our actions have consequences, God stands ready to forgive our sins

Key Bible reference: Exodus 32, Exodus 34.1-10

Key Verse: Exodus 34.6 *The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*

Background Reading: This lesson is disturbing. Israel has been brought safely through the wilderness to the mountain of God. The people have seen the Lord's presence revealed on the mountaintop in storm and fire. Yet, at this point of greatest glory, they turn away from the Lord. Aaron makes a golden calf, and the people worship it. How could this have happened?

Sadly, we know all too well how it could have happened. In our own lives too, we often fail to be equal to the opportunities and guidance we are given by God.

Exodus 32:1-6. Moses had been on the mountain for forty days while God wrote the Law on the two tablets (Exodus 31:18). The people were afraid that something had happened to Moses or perhaps that he had abandoned them. So they turned to Aaron the priest, whom Moses had left in charge (Exodus 24:13-14), and said, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us" (Exodus 32:1). Aaron melted down their gold jewelry and cast an image of a young bull. The people accepted the image readily, crying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (verse 4). Aaron erected an altar before the golden bull and declared, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD" (verse 5).

Verses 7-14. Meanwhile, on the mountaintop, the Lord has informed Moses of what is taking place below. "Now let me alone," the Lord says, "so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (verse 10). But Moses will not let the Lord alone. He intercedes for his people, appealing to the Lord's own honor. If God brings disaster upon Israel, the Egyptians will say that the Lord brought the people out only to destroy them (verses 11-12). More importantly, Moses reminds the Lord of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord had delivered Israel from slavery because of those ancient promises. For God to abandon Israel now would be for God to go back on God's word.

Moses' appeal was successful; "the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (verse 14). Once again, Moses has delivered his people—this time, not from the hand of Pharaoh, but from the wrath of God. However, as we will see, this does not mean that Israel's sin will be without consequences.

Verses 15-20. Moses comes back down the mountain, carrying with him the sacred tablets made by God and upon which God had written the Law. On the lower slopes Moses encounters his servant Joshua, who had accompanied Moses up the mountain (Exodus 24:13). According to this tradition, Joshua, a northern hero who would be Moses' successor, took no part at all in the golden calf incident. In fact, hearing the noise from the

valley below, Joshua thinks that the camp is under attack! But Moses can tell that it is not the sound of a battle but "the sound of revelers" (Exodus 32:17-18).

The two descend to the camp together. When Moses actually sees the Israelites celebrating around the golden bull, he snaps. In anger he hurls the sacred tablets from him, and they shatter at the foot of the mountain. He orders the calf burned in fire and ground to powder; then he sprinkles the powder on water and commands the Israelites to drink it (verse 20). The golden calf is thoroughly and decisively destroyed.

Verses 21-29. Moses now turns to confront those responsible for this outrage. He begins at the top, with his brother Aaron: "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" (verse 21). Aaron claims it was the people's fault: "They are bent on evil" (verse 22). He will not even take responsibility for having molded the calf, claiming that it sprang full-formed from the fire (verses 23-24). The end result of Aaron's irresponsibility is apparent. The people have lost their dignity and their discipline; "for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies" (verse 25).

Moses restores order by calling the sons of Levi around him and ordering them to go "and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor" (verse 27). Three thousand fall before the riot is over, and Moses is once more clearly in command. This warlike role for the Levites is in keeping with their traditional responsibility of guarding the Temple (Numbers 3:14-39) and addressing the troops before battle (Deuteronomy 20:2). To the loyal Levites, Moses says, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD" (Exodus 32:29)—the Levites, all of them, are declared to be priests.

The Hebrew term for ordination means literally "fill the hand." The expression refers to the right to lift up sacrifices to God, but it also was used in the ancient world to refer to killing enemies in war and taking spoils.¹ Grimly, Moses says that the Levites have proven their worth to fill their hands with the blood of the sacrifices by filling their hands with the blood of the Lord's enemies—even when those enemies were family members or former friends.

Verses 30-35. Now, Moses goes back up the mountain—to make atonement for Israel's sin. Indeed, Moses says to the Lord that if Israel's sin cannot be forgiven, he wants his own name blotted from the book as well (verse 32). The Lord, however, refuses to accept any such bargain: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (verse 33). Moses is to continue leading the people to the land of promise, guided by the angel of God. But nonetheless, a day of reckoning will come for Israel's sin (verse 34).

Exodus 34:1-10. These verses were apparently the original J story of the giving of the tablets of the Law. What is most remarkable about this text is the Lord's appearance to Moses and proclamation of the Lord's own name before him (verses 5-7). The Lord, Exodus 34:6 proclaims, is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Prayer: O God, we give thanks for your forgiveness and your steadfast love that have sustained your people in all generations. We pray for ourselves and for all people that we may love and forgive one another and that our hearts and minds may ever be open to your leading on life's journey. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Credits

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