

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Exodus: God Forms His Holy Nation

5. The Shame, The Name, The Glory, The Presence (Exodus 32-40)

There is a lot in this section which begins with threat to the promises of the LORD through Israel's sinning, but ends gloriously with the presence of the glory of the LORD with His people in the Tabernacle.

Chapter 32: The disaster of the golden calf.

Chapter 33: The impending greater disaster of the absence of the LORD.

Chapter 34: The renewal of the covenant grounded in the Glory in the Name.

Chapter 35:1-29: Instructions for contributions to the building of the Tabernacle.

Chapter 35:30-36:38: The construction of the Tabernacle.

Chapter 37: The construction of the furnishings for the holy places.

Chapter 38: Construction of the furnishings for the court, and the court itself.

Chapter 39: Making the priestly garments.

Chapter 40: The erection and consecration of the Tabernacle; the Glory descends!

Between the extraordinary events of chapter 24—the sealing of the covenant, the eating in the presence of the LORD—and the opening of chapter 32 there has not been much narrative. For this reason the words that open this chapter are particularly shocking. The last time we heard the people of Israel speaking was their good pledge and vow at the covenant ceremony, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (24:7).” But now, the very next words we hear them say are (to Aaron) “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

Like the sin in Eden, this turn on the part of the people is completely inexplicable. They have a rationalisation for it — “the people saw that Moses delayed to come down the mountain” (32:1). But is it delay, or is it impatience on their part? (Who sets the timetable for the making of the royal priesthood, the holy nation? You would think it was the One to whom these people will be a special possession...). Aaron, in the face of their hostility towards Moses, and their imperiousness to him, caves in to the demand, taking their gold jewelry (plundered from the Egyptians), melting it down, and fashioning a calf—in the ancient world a symbol of power, strength, military conquest, and divinity. This shows the desire for the visible trappings of power, rather than obedience and dependence on the (invisible) LORD who can only be known through His word and acts (and not be manipulated into any of them!). Aaron attempts to draw lines between their idolising of the calf and the worship of the LORD, by linking it with a festival to the LORD, much like the covenant celebration in 24 (burnt offering, peace offerings).

Paul uses these events to speak warning to the Christians in Corinth (and so to us as readers of that letter). In 1Cor. 10:6-13, he says that these events were written down as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil (as those who did these things did, and who suffered severe discipline from the Lord). Turning to idols is an expression of worldly wisdom (Rom. 1:22-23)—and so it is earthly, unspiritual and *devilish* (Jas. 3:15) and leads to disorder and every vile practice (Jas. 3:16; Rom. 1:24ff.). In His word to Moses about what is happening, the LORD says that the people “have corrupted [ruined, destroyed] themselves (32:7).” In the verses that follow, Paul then lists four events from the travels from Egypt to the Promised Land that are the warning examples. He starts (10:7) with this event at Sinai, then goes to Num. 25 with an example of widespread immorality (10:8), then heads back to Num. 21—testing God (10:9), and back again to Num 14—grumbling (10:10). Then later in 10:14 he

urges the beloved at Corinth to flee idolatry. It seems to me that he sees idolatry as the root of every other evil practice, and that until idolatry is rooted out and destroyed, all other disorder and wrongfulness will keep rearing its head. No wonder John says, as his last word in his first epistle, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols (1John 5:21).

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven...” Here, on the mountain, nothing is hidden from the LORD, and He urges Moses to leave Him alone so that “my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you” (32:10)-but Moses refuses to do so, instead staying with the LORD to plead for mercy for the people (32:11 ff.). In this prayer, Moses’ main concern is not actually the people, or himself, but rather the honour of the name of the LORD. Should the people be destroyed, then the LORD will be thought of as evil-minded, and His Name be disgraced among the nations. The LORD preserves the holiness of His name through covenant faithfulness—“He’s as good as His name”—and it’s to the covenant that Moses refers as he pleads that the LORD relent. “Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel... (32:13)” This is only one of 4 places in the OT where a listing of the three patriarchs culminate in “Israel” rather than “Jacob.” This is a strongly covenantal way of speaking, calling on God to look in His people as the “post-wrestling” people, people in whom the grace of God has come to its goal. The other places where the list is like this are 1Kings 18:36, when Elijah is battling the false prophets, 1Chr.29:18 where David prays following the collection for the building of the Temple, and 2Chr. 30:6 when Hezekiah summons survivors of the Assyrian assault to gather again for Passover. This is the prayer that the LORD was looking for, and He relents from beginning again just with Moses.

Moses’ return to the people—with the holy writ, the covenant law inscribed on stone by the finger of God—sees *his* anger burn hot against them, and leads him to smash the stones at the foot of the mountain, where the people should have been instead of their military tattoo in front of the golden calf. He destroys the calf, and makes the people drink its powder. (Perhaps this is to make obvious just who the guilty ringleaders are?—see Num. 5:11 ff. and the ‘water of bitterness’ as a test). Aaron is confronted with his role in this shame—and he misrepresents what happened. The people had “broken loose” with Aaron’s weakly benign benediction. The verb, “break loose” can mean “act as leader”—i.e. in the face of Aaron’s weakness, all were doing what was right in their own eyes. So, Moses calls any who are “on the LORD’s side” to come to him, and those who do (the Levites) are called to the holy task of searching for the rebel leaders and putting them to death—even if they are brothers, companions or neighbours. This faithful service of theirs ordains them for the service of the LORD in the Tabernacle.

The people are now faced up with their sin—and Moses goes up the mountain to make atonement for them. But the LORD is clear, those who sinned will be blotted from His book, and He will visit a plague on His people at the time of His visitation (which is recounted in the next verse). As He speaks with Moses, the LORD has not reversed His purpose to *not* destroy Israel and begin again—judgment is not rejection by God, but His holy covenant jealousy in action. But it does seem (32:34) that He will not personally accompany Israel to the land of promise; rather Moses is called to lead them, with the promise that His angel (Moses?) will go ahead of them to clear the way for “you [pl.]” 33:1-3 makes it clear that the risk for the people for the LORD to be with them is that their sinfulness may lead to their destruction by His holiness. The people hear this “disastrous word”—there is something much worse than death, and

that is abandonment by the LORD. They mourn, not dressing themselves up in their ornaments. (The calf had not taken all the plunder—which meant that the LORD’s intention for the golden furnishings in the Tabernacle could be fulfilled). This ritual mourning became the normal way of dress for the rest of their travels. It was an important sign from them of their desire that things could be right with the LORD again (33:4-6).

So Moses intercedes for the people (33:12-16). He really wrestles with the LORD, holding Him to His own word. He argues that he cannot bring these people up alone. The LORD has said that he has found favour in His sight, that He knows him by name—but if that is so, then the LORD must consider that this nation is “Your people.” See 32:1—the people distance themselves from the LORD by ascribing their rescue to Moses, and in 32:7 the LORD seems to do the same, calling Israel “your [i.e. Moses’] people” whom he (Moses) brought out of Egypt. It is Moses who will not think of the people as belonging to anyone but the LORD, and their rescue as by His hand, to whom He swore promises to bless and multiply (32:11, 13; 33:13). Without the LORD’s going with them, they cannot be distinct, a holy nation and royal priesthood (33:16). That very thing depends on the presence of the LORD among them. And that is the only thing that shows the LORD’s favour with His people.

And the LORD answers Moses’ prayer with all that he asks, and all the He has promised. “My presence will go with you, and I will give your rest (33:14).” Moses presses further (33:15, 18) in effect asking the LORD to guarantee it by putting His honour on the line with it. And the LORD assents—“This very thing that you have spoken I will do... I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD’...” For the LORD to show His glory is to proclaim His name, i.e. His essential being. The doctrine of the simplicity of God is very important. It means that God is all that He is in all the He is—He is not comprised of parts, made of elements. None of the “characteristics of God” exist on their own; all He is, He is all together and all the time. When God proclaims His name, He opens up His being, not simply a part of Himself. (It would be impossible for God to do this, as He is not made of “parts.”) Moses will not be able to encounter God in a bare, full-faced way—for to do so would be to no longer live! (I wonder if perhaps the “tree of life” in the midst of the garden of Eden was a symbol of the personal presence and knowledge of God?) So, Moses is to hide in a cleft in a rock, covered by the hand of God (it is a personal mercy of God that we are not yet exposed to the full light of His glory) until the LORD has passed by, before seeing then the back of God. But what a sight!

Except it is not really the sight of God that the encounter focuses on—rather it’s the hearing of the proclamation and exposition by the LORD of His own holy name. In 34:1-4 Moses has to prepare for this momentous event, getting two tablets ready, to replace those he smashed, and then ascending alone onto the mountain. This is really a replay of the first giving of the law in 20:22ff. and 24:12ff. And there the LORD descends to him and proclaims His name:

“The LORD, the LORD

God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness
keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and
the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

The second line of my setting out of this proclamation above is all adjectival—and the third and fourth lines are all participial. Adjectival words are really getting to the heart

of who God is, they describe His essential character. The participial clauses that follow are the actions of God that flow from His character. So, essentially the LORD's nature is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in steadfast love and faithfulness. This is the well-spring of the covenant with Israel which has the blessing of the world in view. The future of the world hangs on the goodwill of God—and that goodwill is more than goodwill—it is grace, it is steadfast and faithful even in the face of a world that has corrupted itself and broken loose, casting off His bonds. This is the very heart of God and so, and only so, we can say, “You have made the world so firm that it can never be shaken”—even in the face of the chaotic forces of destructive evil and wickedness (Ps. 93).

The actions that flow from this character of the LORD though are less predictable than we might imagine. The LORD is not the God of an infinitely weak and benign benediction as perhaps Aaron had imagined Him to be. His mercy and grace operate in forgiveness and in judgment. The remarkable thing about that judgment though is its limitation. The LORD will not let situations under judgment run on forever. His judgments come to an end (Rev. 15:1), but His mercies do not (Lam. 3:22). Three generations—four at most—and the LORD brings a time of renewing and refreshing.

This revelation by the LORD brings Moses to worship—for the first time he talks with the LORD of the sin of the people and their need for pardon (34:9). We can only confess sins and seek pardon when we have seen that God is the God of all grace. In Jesus Christ “grace and mercy” have appeared. In meeting Jesus Christ we can finally speak of the unspeakable, confess what has been unable to be uncovered, because in him we meet the God and Father who is giving His Son for the sins of the world. Think of all those who stuck for ages in sin fall at Jesus' feet and find a new world, a new hope in him. This is the glory of the Father and of the Son—and so Jesus prayed, as he went to the cross, that the Father glorify him so that the Son may glorify Him (John 17:1). At the cross the grace and mercy, the abundance of steadfast love and faithfulness, the slowness to anger of the LORD reaches its climax as He gives His Son for the sin of the world, establishing a grace full and free. A grace that is fuller and freer than the pathetic benediction of Aaron and the “acceptance” mob—a grace that is a power to liberate men and women and children into the covenant of God with the law of the Holy One written on the heart.

The LORD's covenant with the people is renewed (34:10-28) with its attendant law, and with the promise of inheritance in the land. More, the LORD says that He will do wonders in and through Israel, such as never have been seen before on the earth. “It is an awesome thing I will do with you.” This promise finds its fulfilment in the incarnation of the Son of God and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, first on him and then through him on the church.

The construction of the Tabernacle is detailed carefully in Exodus 35–39, and the workers who prepare everything are blessed by Moses when they are done (39:43) for it is all done in faithfulness to the LORD's command. Then the pieces are brought together and the Tabernacle is erected. And then the promise is kept—that impossible promise, given all that Israel have done in rebellion, but that is possible because of the LORD's own being—as the cloud that covered the mountain shifts over to cover the tent, and the glory of the LORD (all that glory that Moses saw!) fills the tabernacle. That glory cloud stays—all through the wanderings of the desert to the land; whenever the cloud moved they would set out and if it remained they would stay. Israel, the holy nation and royal priesthood, had the presence of the LORD with them.