

Exodus 32:30–35

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we saw Moses praying. The whole nation of Israel was about to be destroyed because of their sin with the golden calf. And yet even as the Lord was about to destroy the Israelites, He was also calling Moses to pray. And, so, Moses did pray – because the existence of Israel and God’s plan of salvation for the world depended on it. Moses prayed earnestly, and the Lord listened.

- Exodus 32:14 — And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Remember that while what Moses prays is important, what’s even more important is who Moses is. Moses is the man that **God** appointed ahead of time precisely **for** just such a day as this. Before this day came and before the Israelites ever built the golden calf, God called and appointed Moses to be **the covenant mediator** – to be the man who would stand in the gap. And *this, especially*, is what explains the “success” of Moses’ prayer in this moment, when the prayer of *anyone else* would have been completely unavailing. (cf. Jer. 15:1) In the “success” of Moses’ prayer, we learn not only about the effectiveness of prayer **in general** (cf. James 5:16-18), but especially about the effectiveness of intercessory prayer that’s offered up to God **by our covenant mediator**. In other word, when our covenant mediator prays on behalf of the covenant people that he represents, his prayers are powerfully effective in a way that no one else’s intercessory prayers could ever be.

So, two weeks ago, we saw Moses pray – and the Lord answered. We saw the power and effectiveness of Moses’ intercessory prayer as the covenant mediator. This week, we’re about to see something significantly different.

I. Exodus 32:30 — The next day Moses said to the people, “You have **sinned** a great **sin**. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your **sin**.”

At first, we might be confused. Hasn’t Moses already prayed, and hasn’t God already “relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on His people”? The answer is “yes,” and “yes”! So, hasn’t the danger already passed? And the answer is, apparently, “no.”

The entire nation will not be destroyed, but this doesn’t mean that there won’t be any further punishment and judgment. Even after the golden calf has been destroyed, and even after three thousand people have been killed by the Levites, the holy anger of God is still burning. Because, after all, the people of Israel are still guilty.

So, “Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a **great** sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your **sin**.’” Moses isn’t talking, here, about the kind of “atonement” we normally think of with the shedding of blood and animal sacrifices. For *this* sin, there is no sacrifice that can be offered. So, Moses’ point is simply this: “Your sin still deserves a terrible, *terrible* punishment and judgment. Therefore, I will go up to the Lord and pray for you

again. Perhaps the Lord will hear my prayer, and not punish you and judge you as you still deserve.” Will the prayer of Moses, the covenant mediator, be as effective this time as it was the last time?

II. Exodus 32:31 — So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold.”

Are we just a little bit uncomfortable listening to Moses’ prayer? Does it cause us, at all, to squirm in our seat? Why does Moses have to say, *again*, just *how* bad Israel’s sin is? (“Alas, this people has sinned a **great** sin.”) Why does Moses have to recite, *again*, the gory details (“They have made for themselves gods of gold”)? If God already knows this, then wouldn’t it just be common sense to avoid rehearsing it all over again? The problem is that the moment we do this – the moment we fail to call sin what it really is, no matter how self-condemning that might be – deep down, we’re really just excusing our sin, rather than truly confessing it.

Whenever we confess our sins to the Lord, we ought to follow the example of Moses. Rather than just trying to *avoid* any excuses or any whitewashing of our sin, we ought to actually make it our conscious goal to be as brutally honest as possible—to be as detailed and explicit about the true nature of our sin as we can be—because this is what true confession really is. It *will* feel uncomfortable, to say the least. We’ll feel that by our own words we’re condemning ourselves to God’s judgment. But, then, we’ll also be acknowledging that we truly have no other plea but the grace and the mercy of God. The first mark of a true Christian is that he is one who knows his sin, and who *truly confesses* that sin to the Lord. (cf. 1 John 1:8-9)

But, of course, here Moses is not confessing his own sin, but the sin of the people that he represents as their covenant mediator. And so, after fully acknowledging the sin of the people, Moses continues his prayer:

III. Exodus 32:32 — “But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”

Try to let that sink in for just a moment. Try to comprehend this kind of love. “But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” Moses is pleading with God to **forgive** Israel – which simply means that he’s asking God to withdraw any further threat of the punishment Israel still deserves. Moses knows that He can’t die *in the place* of the people. That’s not what he’s asking. He knows that his death can’t be the *substitute* for the punishment Israel deserves. And yet his love for his people is so great—his desire that they should be spared the suffering of God’s judgment is so strong—that if God will not forgive them he asks that he himself would suffer God’s judgment right along *with* them.

Now, it wasn’t Moses who built the golden calf – it was the Israelites. And as Aaron has just recently said, Moses knows this people well, that they are a people set on evil. (cf. Exod. 32:22) So, I can tell you right now that I don’t feel like I can understand a love like this. I don’t feel like I can comprehend praying a prayer like this. Maybe I should. But if I’m just being completely honest, I don’t.

Here in Exodus 32, the “book” that God has written isn’t so much the record of those who have eternal life as it is the record of those who are alive. It’s not so much the “book of life” as it is the “book of the living.”

- Psalm 69:28 — Let [the wicked] be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

So, what it’s important to see is that what Moses primarily has in mind are the *temporal* judgments of God in such things as plagues, and famine, and pestilence, and sword. These are all things that cause terrible suffering, with the common result of death – of being blotted out of the record of the living that God keeps in heaven.*

So, let’s try to understand this one more time. Moses’ love for his people is so great—his desire that they should be spared any of the suffering of God’s judgment is so strong—that if God will not forgive them he asks that he himself would suffer God’s judgment and die right along *with* them. If there are to be *more* people killed by the sword or by the plague, then Moses is asking that *he* be included in their number. One commentator writes: “It is not easy to estimate the measure of love in a Moses... for the narrow boundary of our reasoning powers does not comprehend it.” (Bengel, quoted in Keil) I’ve tried this week to comprehend the love of a Moses, and I’ve failed. But, then, the less able we are to comprehend it and the more utterly foreign it is to us, the more amazed we are at how great, and beautiful, and wonderful this kind of love must be.

So, now we can ask again: Will the prayer of Moses, the covenant mediator, be as effective this time as it was the last time? We go on to read in verse 33:

IV. Exodus 32:33 — But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.”

That’s the word of the Lord. This is what God has said. “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.” This is the same sobering word that we see throughout all the Bible from beginning to end. “Sin came into the world through one man, and **death** through **sin**... The wages of **sin** is **death**.” (cf. Rom. 5:12; 6:23) “Whoever has sinned against me,” God says, “I will blot out of my book.” While the primary emphasis is on the *temporal* judgment, when **God**

* Sometimes, God’s “book” is expressive of God’s sovereign decree and purpose (cf. Ps. 139:16; Isa. 34:16; Dan. 10:21; Jer. 22:30), but not always. At other times, God’s “book” is expressive of His careful attention to things on earth – or His intimate knowledge of all that happens on the earth (cf. Ps. 56:8; Isa. 65:6-7; Mal. 3:16; Rev. 20:12). We could think of this second kind of book as being constantly updated and revised. Most often, when the content of God’s book is a list of the names of people, this is the record of those specifically recorded as current/living citizens of the covenant community (“Zion”; “Jerusalem”; Ps. 87:5-6; Isa. 4:3; Ezek. 13:9; cf. Heb. 12:23). In Exodus 32, however, Moses seems to be thinking more broadly of a “book” in which all who live on the earth are written. Later on, in Daniel (7:10; 12:1) and then in the New Testament, we see the more fully developed concept of the “book of life,” which was written before the foundation of the world. (cf. Rev. 13:8) On the one hand, this book is expressive of God’s sovereign decree, and so cannot be altered or changed. (cf. Rev. 13:8) On the other hand, God uses the hope of never having our names blotted out of the book of life as an incentive to “conquer” by a life of faithfulness and obedience. (Rev. 3:5) For other references to the book of life, see Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 20:12, 15; 21:27.

speaks of blotting someone out of His book, we can't help but hear the warning of eternal judgment in the second death.

So, Moses prays that God would forgive the people and leave off the judgment and punishment that they deserve. Moses prays that if God will not spare the people, then may he, too, share in their punishment, and be blotted out of God's book. And to both of these requests, God answers: "**no.**" "The LORD said to Moses, '**Whoever has sinned against me**, I will blot out of my book.'"

So, we know what this means for Moses, but are we ready to admit to ourselves what this means for the people? Can God really be serious? Is it really true that God will **not** forgive?

V. Exodus 32:34 — But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

So, there's good news. And, then, there's bad news. The good news is that not only has God relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on His people (32:14), but He's still committed to accomplishing His saving purposes for the world through His people. There's no way to overstate the good news that this is. Back in chapter 23, the Lord said:

➤ Exodus 23:20 — Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

And now, again, the Lord says to Moses, "Go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you." All God's purposes are apparently still on track. He'll still keep all His promises; He'll still fulfill all His word.

But... or as the ESV translates: "**Nevertheless**, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." For as good as the good news is, it's also hard to overstate the bad news that *this* is. Put simply, God will **not** forgive this sin. God *won't* forgive this people who have already broken His covenant on the very day that it was made. God *will* send His angel to bring the people to the place that He's prepared, but *after that—eventually*—there **will** come a day when He will visit *this* sin upon them – when the people will be **punished in full** for this sin of the golden calf. (cf. Stuart)

So, right now maybe we're asking: How can God punish a future generation for the sin that this generation of Israelites has committed? God is looking, here, at the nation as a whole, not at particular individuals within the nation. So, this is Israel in her youth. On that future day of punishment, even if it should be hundreds of years later, it will still be the *same* Israel, just "grown up." And here's the assumption: As Israel is *now* in her youth, so she'll still be when she's grown. Whatever future generation it may be that experiences the full wrath and fury of God's judgment, that generation will be just as guilty of idolatry—even more so—than this generation is right now at the foot of Mount Sinai. (cf. Deut. 31:28-29; Luke 11:49-51)

Never before have we had even the hint of such a threat against the people of God. But, then again, there's hardly been time. The people are still only in their infancy. And now, no sooner

have they come into existence than we have the warning of a coming judgment that hangs over their head like a dark cloud. God will not forgive. God will visit Israel's sin upon them. The timing of that day is never revealed. Instead, it's the constant threat of that day that warns every future generation of Israel to live in such a way that it might not be them. From now on, there will always be a sense in which God's forgiveness is in some sense *postponement*. In the day when God visits, He will visit Israel's sin upon them. In the day when God visits, Israel will experience the full fury of God's judgment for the sin of the golden calf. Even though Moses, the covenant mediator has prayed, God will not forgive. (cf. Josh. 24:19) And so, finally, we read in verse 35:

VI. Exodus 32:35 — Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

As the sign of a coming day of wrath and judgment (a day that we now know was still some 860 years away), the Lord now sends a **plague** on **His own** people. We have to be careful not to read over this too lightly. In the Bible, the very first time we see this Hebrew word for “plague” is in Exodus chapter eight when the Lord says to Pharaoh, through Moses:

- Exodus 8:2 — If you refuse to let [my people] go, behold, I will **plague** all your country with frogs.

The second time we see this word is in chapter nine, when Moses says to Pharaoh:

- Exodus 9:3–4 — Behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe **plague** upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.

The third time this word appears is in chapter 11:

- Exodus 11:1 — The LORD said to Moses, “Yet one **plague** more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt.

Until this moment, here at the foot of Mount Sinai, the “plague” has always been reserved for the Egyptians. Now, for the very first time, God sends the **plague** on His own people.

What can that mean? This plague is just a sampling—“a small-scale warning”—of the wrath that's now been determined against Israel. (cf. Stuart) It's a sign, in the present, that a day of judgment is now coming – though no one knows when. In that day when God visits, He will visit Israel's sin upon them. Even though Moses, the covenant mediator, has prayed, God will not forgive. And so, some 850 years later, we hear the Lord say to the prophet, Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah 15:1–4 — Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go! And when they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword; those who are for

famine, to famine, and those who are for captivity, to captivity.’ I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the LORD: the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

Conclusion

The destruction and exile of God’s people that still seems so far away was already determined from the very beginning – from the day that Israel worshiped the golden calf. For 860 years, the people lived with the constant, absolute *certainty* that one day, God’s wrath would fall. For **860 years**, the dark cloud of coming judgment hung over their heads. Think of that. And for the greater part of those 860 years, the people continued to worship their idols. And God would **not forgive** – **not even** though a Moses or a Samuel should stand before Him. It was Joshua who said to the people before he died:

- Joshua 24:19 — You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; **he will not forgive** your transgressions or your sins.

Which is just to say: “You will bear, *in full*, the punishment for *all your sins*.” (cf. Currid)

So **why**, if judgment is already determined, does God still say that He’ll send His angel and bring His people into the land? What’s, really, the point? It was during all those 860 years of waiting for a coming judgment that God was showing His people their **need** for a **better** mediator than Moses. (cf. Heb. 3:5-6) It was during all those 860 years in the land, all while waiting for a coming judgment, that God was preparing the way to **give** that **better** mediator to His people.

What God’s people needed was a mediator who could pray a **better** prayer than Moses. A mediator who prays that God will forgive, and when **He** prays, God always says “**yes**.”

We can be so used to God “forgiving” that we easily take it for granted that He does. We can be so used to God being merciful, and patient, and longsuffering that we easily take it for granted that He is. But it’s so we won’t ever take these things for granted that we’re reminded today that God is also a God who *doesn’t* forgive – not even when Moses, the covenant mediator, prays.

Do you see, today, who we have in Christ? What Joshua said to the people of Israel, he could just as easily have said to us: “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.” Just like the people of Israel, we were all, by nature, children of wrath – living with the constant cloud of judgment hanging over our heads. (cf. Eph. 2:3) What Aaron said of the Israelites, he could just as easily have said of us: “You know the people, that they are set on evil.” (Exod. 32:22) Just like the people of Israel, we were all sons of disobedience, living in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. (cf. Eph. 2:2-3) And God did not have to forgive. Indeed, God *would not* forgive unless someone should come to succeed where *Moses failed* – to pray for us the prayer that *Moses could never pray*.

Do you see, today, who we have in Christ? Where the plea of Moses, that he should suffer God's judgment along with the people, was rejected, Christ's willingness to suffer God's judgment in our place was acceptable to God. Jesus did for us what Moses could never do, so that **Jesus** might pray the prayer for us that Moses could never effectively pray. (cf. John 17)

But *why* would Jesus want to pray for us? *Why* would Jesus be willing to suffer judgment in our place?

- Romans 5:7–9 — For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his **love** for us in that **while we were still sinners** [while we were still those worshipping the golden calf at the foot of the mountain], **Christ died for us**. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be **saved by him from the wrath of God**.

In other words, **forgiven**.

I've tried this week to comprehend the love of a *Moses*, and I've failed. How much more, then, will we fail to ever comprehend the love of God, *in Christ*? But, then, the less able we are to comprehend that love and the more utterly foreign it is to us, the more amazed we are at how great, and how beautiful, and how wonderful this kind of **love** must be.

- Galatians 2:20 — [We] have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer [we] who live, but Christ who lives in [us]. And the life [we] now live in the flesh [we] live by faith in the Son of God, who **LOVED [us]** and **GAVE HIMSELF for [us]**.