

Exodus 33:1–11

Introduction

This morning, the story of the golden calf *continues*. Of course, it's not *really* the story of the golden calf, but the story of who God is – His character and His ways, and also who we are, and who God has called us to be. But calling it the story of the golden calf can still be helpful, and as we're about to see, it's *far* from over.

First, Israel was in danger of being consumed – completely wiped off the face of the earth. But Moses prayed, and the Lord heard Moses' prayer and relented of the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on His people.

Then we saw the golden calf destroyed, and 3000 people killed with the sword of the Levites.

Then we saw Moses praying a second time – praying that God would forgive the people, and not give them the punishment they still deserved. This time, however, Moses' prayer is not quite *as* successful. God answers that He will still bring the people of Israel into the Promised Land, but *eventually—someday—He will* punish Israel *in full* for their sin with the golden calf. If, by forgiving, we mean a postponing of judgment, then yes, God will forgive. But if, by forgiving, we mean a permanent exemption from God's judgment, then no, God will not forgive. As a sign of this coming judgment God sends a *plague*, for the first time, upon His very own people.

OK. So shouldn't this, finally, be the end of the matter? What further consequences or repercussions from the sin with the golden calf could there possibly be? Maybe we underestimate our sin.

I. Exodus 33:1–3a — The LORD said to Moses, “**Depart; go up from here**, you and the people **whom *you* have brought up out of the land of Egypt**, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey...”

There's *so much*, here, that sounds *so very good*. There's all sorts of language reminding us of all the wonderful promises of God. A land flowing with milk and honey. (Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5) Driving out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (Exod. 3:8, 17; 23:23) The oath that God swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. It could definitely seem like we can finally breathe a sigh of relief – finally, everything is back on track. Only, there's this little gnawing doubt.

The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom ***you*** have brought up out of the land of Egypt.” Over and over again, the text has emphasized that it's the *Lord* who brought Israel up out of Egypt. (cf. 13:3, 9, 14; 16:6) Three times God Himself has said that it was *He* who brought Israel up from the land of Egypt. In the preface to the Ten Commandments, we read:

- Exodus 20:2 (cf. 12:17; 16:32) — *I* am the LORD your God, who **brought you out** of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

So, in this context of the sin with the golden calf, when God chooses to emphasize the role of *Moses* in bringing Israel out of Egypt (cf. 3:12), there's this immediate pit in our stomach – a gnawing, sick kind of feeling. The last time God spoke like this, it was the setup for His threat to wipe out the entire nation of Israel. (cf. 32:7, 10)

- Exodus 32:7, 10 — And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves... Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”

And then there's also this: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘**Depart; go up from here**, you and the people whom **you** have brought up out of the land of Egypt.’” “Depart” – from where? From the mountain of God. “Go up” – from where? From Mount Sinai, the mountain of God's glorious presence. Now that *shouldn't* be a bad thing. The reason for the *tabernacle* is so that God might remove from the top of Mount Sinai, and actually travel *with* His people, living in their very midst. The point of the tabernacle is so the people can take “Mount Sinai” **with them**, wherever they go – not high up and far off, but near and close. (see message on Exodus 24:12-25:9) Only, when we hear the sharpness of God's command, “depart; go up from here,” it has the sound of a people being sent away – sent away from God's presence. “Depart” **from me**. “Go up” **from my presence**.

We might think to ourselves: Hasn't this already dragged on long enough? Hasn't there already been judgment enough in the past, and the warning of judgment enough in the future. Shouldn't this mean that for the time being, at least, everything can proceed according to plan? Apparently not.

We know the Lord's angel will still go **before** the people **as He always has**^{*} in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, but now, how can that possibly be **enough**? How can that be enough after Israel's far greater experience of God's presence at Mount Sinai, and the giving of the covenant, and the instructions for the tabernacle? There's so much in these verses that sounds so good. A land flowing with milk and honey. Driving out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The oath that God swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. But in the end, how good can it ever really be if the experience of God's presence at Mount Sinai is to be permanently left behind?

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey,” God says...

II. Exodus 33:3b — “...but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

* Some commentators emphasize that this is “*an* angel” versus “*my* angel” in Exodus 23:23. However, this observation is invalidated by the fact that “my angel” in 23:23 is *first* referred to as “an angel” in 23:20 *and also* by the fact that God has only recently reaffirmed the promise of “my angel” in 32:34. This angel is a “theophany” as the very name of Yahweh is in him (23:21), but he goes “before” the people (not among/with them), and this manifestation of God's presence cannot compare to the far greater manifestation of His presence at Mount Sinai.

What good are all the promises of God without God? What good is a land flowing with milk and honey if God is not there? What good is a great job, and a happy family, and good food, and all the pleasures of life without God? What good are all the gifts of God without the God who is the giver of all those gifts?

Back in Exodus 25, God said:

➤ Exodus 25:8 — And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell **in their midst**.

In chapter 29, God says:

➤ Exodus 29:44–46 — I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell **among the people of Israel** and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell **among them**. I am the LORD their God.

The whole point of bringing Israel out of Egypt was so that God might dwell among them – live with them and be near them. That’s the whole point of the Tabernacle. That’s the whole point of this whole book. Only now we hear God saying: “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but **I will *not* go up among you.**”

So, God relents of the first “disaster,” only to proclaim a second. And here’s where we need to be asking ourselves a question: *For this covenant people*, which disaster is worse?—To be completely destroyed and annihilated, or to be allowed to go on living without God in your midst? Should we still be breathing a sigh of relief at this point, or should we be right back where we started, when God threatened Israel with total destruction? In fact, I wonder if at this point, our feeling of doom and despair should be *greater* than it was before.

Notice the *reason* God will not go up among the people. He says: “*lest* I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” What makes this pronouncement so hopeless is that it’s actually, in some way, the expression of God’s kindness. The danger in chapter 32 was that God was going to “consume” (*calah*) the people. (32:10) Now, in chapter 33, God withdraws His presence from the people *in order that* He might not “consume” (*calah*) them! And so the people are trapped with no way out. If God *does* go up among the people, the people will be consumed – because they’re a stiff-necked and sinful people. But if God does *not* go up among the people—then what – is – the point?

If there’s to be no tabernacle situated at the center of the camp, what good is anything that’s ever happened until now – saving Israel out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, guiding them through the desert, giving the law and the covenant? If God *doesn’t* go up among the people—the people that **He** brought up out of the land of Egypt—what good is anything that could ever happen in the future – including *even* a land flowing with milk and honey? It’s all vain, and empty. It’s all for nothing.

But, then again, *if* God *does* go up among them...

The people are trapped between two ultimate disasters. In chapter 32, God relented of the “disaster/evil” (*ra-ah*) that He had proclaimed. Now, in chapter 33, it’s like we’re effectively back at square one:

III. Exodus 33:4–6 — When the people heard *this* disastrous [evil; *ra*] word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

I don’t know if this is the mourning of repentance, or not. I wish it was. But even if the people have not yet comprehended their own sin, they’re smart enough to want to avoid “disaster.” They built the golden calf to guarantee the nearness of Yahweh. Now, the golden calf has been destroyed, and the true sign of Yahweh’s presence—the tabernacle—is no longer to be built. No ark of the covenant, no altar of incense, no table and lampstand, no altar of burnt offering, no bronze basin, no outer court, no Holy Place, no Most Holy Place. The people understand that this is a disastrous word – this is an “evil” word. And so they mourn, and they weep, and they put off all their usual “happy” apparel. In fact, God tells the people that it’s His will that they take off all their accessories and jewelry not just now, but for the foreseeable future. In other words, the people are to be in a constant state of mourning over the constant danger that they live in because of their sin. Take off all your ornaments. Mourn without ceasing. I must decide what to do with you.

But in the midst of all the mourning, and the despair, there is *one* faint glimmer of hope that *maybe* not *all* is lost: “So now,” God says, “take off your ornaments, **that I may know** what to do with you.” The point, here, is not that God is trying to figure something out, like we try to figure things out. The point is that God is still waiting. He’s announced what He *will* do, but He hasn’t yet followed through. The threat is real (because it’s necessary if Israel is not to be consumed), but God would also remind his servant Moses – the one who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt – that He has *not yet* carried it out.

The constant tension in these chapters is almost too much, isn’t it? We just want it to go away. I know I do. But before we can follow the story any further – before we can find out what the end of it all will be – the suspense is heightened even further with a very long break in the action.

IV. Exodus 33:1–23 — Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it **outside the camp, far off from the camp**, and **he called it the tent of meeting**. And everyone who sought the LORD would **go out** to the tent of meeting, which was **outside the camp**. Whenever Moses **went out** to the tent, **all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent**. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And **when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down in worship,[†] each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend**. When Moses **turned again into the camp**, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

[†] See the note on this verse in the NET Bible. Also see the NRSV, HCSB, YLT, and NLT.

Apparently, there's always been another tent – a *different* tent – where the Lord would meet with Moses and speak with him. This tent had no altar or sacrifices, it had no Ark of the Covenant, and no “Most Holy Place.” It was simply the customary place where God would meet with Moses. But why does this matter *here*? Why is Moses telling us this *now*?

Notice that even though this is a *different* tent, we're specifically told that Moses called it by the *same* name – “the tent of meeting.” Fifteen times, already, the *tabernacle* has been called the “tent of meeting.” (cf. 29:42; 30:36) So by calling both tents the “tent of meeting,” and by emphasizing that point here, Moses creates an obvious tension. The tabernacle was to be located in the midst of the people – at the very center and heart of the Israelite camp. This tent, however, where the Lord has so far been accustomed to meet with Moses is pitched “**outside the camp**” and “**far off from the camp.**” Anyone who wants to inquire of the Lord must “**go out**” to the tent which was “**outside the camp.**” It's said that Moses, too, “**went out**” to the tent, and then he would “**turn again into the camp.**” How much more thorough could Moses be? How much more graphically could Moses paint the picture of a God who is distant and far off?

Up until Mount Sinai, this arrangement had been “sufficient.” But *after* the revelation of God's glory on Mount Sinai, after the covenant meal on Mount Sinai, after the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, can you see that what was once a wonderful blessing is now, in a sense, the worst kind of disaster?[‡]

We asked how much more graphically Moses could paint the picture of a God who is distant and far off. Well, there's also this. The Lord, in the pillar of cloud, would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent *only* when *Moses* went out to the tent. And where were all the people whenever *Moses* would go out to the tent? They were all standing and **watching**, each one at his own “**tent door.**” And what did all the people do whenever they saw the Lord come down in the pillar of cloud? They all rose and bowed down in **worship**, each one at his own “**tent door.**” Is that the picture of worship that we've seen with the tabernacle? Is it a people watching and worshipping from afar at the entrance to their own tents, or is it a people invited to **enter in** to the courts of the *Lord's* tent – to worship at the entrance of *His* own royal dwelling?

After everything we've seen to this point, what we have in these verses is just a sad and hopeless picture. It truly is, isn't it? **Except for this one thing:** “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”(!) And, so, we're reminded that even as the people are trapped between these two ultimate disasters, there is still one, and *only one*, who *could* still pray and intercede for the people.

But still, what difference could even the prayer of a Moses really make? What other alternative is *there*? Either the people depart and the Lord does not go up among them, or the Lord does go up among them and the people will most assuredly be consumed.

[‡] Specifically, this is the worst kind of disaster if it's the *only* tent. It appears that the “tent of meeting” outside the camp continued to exist throughout the wilderness wanderings **in conjunction** with the Tabernacle “tent of meeting” in the midst of the camp. (cf. Numbers 11:16, 26-30; 12:4)

Conclusion

We came into this morning feeling like we should be at the end of the matter – like the golden calf episode should now be behind us. We couldn't have been more wrong. The constant, sustained tension in these chapters begins to wear us down. Will we never see the end? Is there no way out? The point of all this is **not** for dramatic effect. It's real.

And so we mourn and we groan like the Israelites. And we begin to remember what it was to be still in our sins, without God, and without hope in the world. We were all, at one time, dead in our sins, without God and without hope in the world. (cf. Eph. 2:12)

But in the midst of all the mourning and groaning here in Exodus 33, there is that one faint glimmer of hope that *maybe—somehow*—not *all* is lost. The threat is *real*, and yet see how God reminds his servant Moses – the one who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt – that He has **not yet** carried it out. The threat is *real*, and yet see how in the midst of it all, we're given a picture of the relationship between God and His covenant mediator, that we could never before have **dared** to imagine. "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."

And then, just as our hope is strengthening, it's almost completely smothered by this one simple question: What other alternative *is there*? Either the people depart from Mount Sinai and the Lord does **not** go up among them... Or the Lord **does** go up among them and the people *will* most *assuredly* be *immediately* **consumed**.

As the story drags on, and the tension never lets up, we begin to wear down. Will we never see the end? Is there no way out? And so we're given a taste of what it was, and what it is, to be **without God** and **without hope** in this world.

For right now, I just want to leave us all struggling in this tension – in this apparent absence of any way out. Come back *next* week for the final end of the matter. Come back next week to see the story of the golden calf brought to its ultimate, *astonishing*, conclusion. No exaggeration. **Until then**, remember what it was—and what it is—to **mourn**, and to **groan**. (cf. Eph. 2:11-12; Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:2-4)