

Go Down, Moses  
Exodus 32:7-14  
1/26/2014

I'm sure that many parents have had a time in their lives when their children have rebelled against them, and done things that they were told many times not to do. At this point in time, a very common reaction is for both parents to temporarily disown their children. You know what I'm talking about: "Well, they're your children, do with them what you please!" "No, they're your children, you handle it!" This is precisely the situation that God and Moses face as they behold a people that have plunged headlong into iniquity. God says to Moses that Israel is the people that Moses brought up out of the land of Egypt (verse 7). Moses turns around and tells God that it was God who brought them out of the land of Egypt (verse 11). Neither God nor Moses are currently taking responsibility for the people. That sets up a situation where Moses is going to be tested as to whether he is a good mediator for the people or not. In this passage, therefore, we will learn a lot about what a mediator does, and so we will learn about our own mediator, Jesus Christ.

Last week we saw that the people had gotten completely out of control. This week we see that God obviously knows about the situation. And so He tells Moses to go down. Now, right away we see something interesting about that command. If it was God's intention to destroy the entire people of Israel, then why would He tell Moses to go down and see for himself? God didn't need Moses if He wanted to judge the people of Israel. That means that we need to think about this text differently than most people do. You see, most people look at this passage and see God about judge Israel, and then Moses does his thing, and then God changes His mind. This is not correct. God is making Moses into a mediator, and God is putting a test in front of him. God is egging Moses on, so that he will become the mediator God wants him to be.

The first element of the test is God distancing Himself from the people. We have already seen that God says that Moses was the one who brought up Israel out of Egypt. Of course, that was no lie: Moses was most definitely involved! But if the people are going to disown God so badly, then He will disown them. After verse 8, which is a straightforward description of what the people have done, God does some more distancing of Himself from the people. He says "this people." For those of us who were here last week, we saw in verse 1 how the people disowned Moses by saying "this fellow Moses." Well here God turns the tables and says "this people." It is the derogatory remark of someone who does not want to be associated with the people Israel. There is a deep irony in the turning of the tables: God is vindicating His servant Moses, the very one they rejected. The very person the people rejected is the only one who can intercede for them. Sounds like another instance of that irony in the Psalms: the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone!

God further distances Himself from the people by describing the people as being "stiff-necked." The imagery comes from the world of animals. If the farmer has an ox or a cow that will not turn its head when directed to do so by the reins, then the ox or cow

will keep on plunging ahead regardless of what the farmer wants it to do. That is what “stiff-necked” means. There is an ironic twist to that description, because, of course, a golden calf made of metal will have a very stiff neck indeed. So the people become like what they worship. If the golden cow has a stiff neck, then so do the people. Of course, that principle works the opposite way, too. If we worship the one true God, then we will become like Him. Whatever we worship in our hearts, we will become like the object of our worship. God is obviously saying here that the people are not like Him. Instead, they are stiff-necked. God has distanced Himself in those three ways: by saying that Moses brought them out of Egypt, by saying “this people,” and by calling them “stiff-necked.”

That brings us to verse 10. Here is where God brings the test of the mediator to a head. The words “Let me alone” are sort of a giveaway, actually, that God is testing Moses. If God were actually going to destroy the entire people, would He speak as if Moses could stand in the breach, as Psalm 106 says?

The last part of the verse makes it all clear. God is saying that if Moses will not mediate for the people, then God will make Moses into a new Abraham. These words are the very words God said to Abraham. God seems to be saying that the promise to Abraham is null and void! Moses is thus faced with a serious test: will he mediate for the people, or will he pursue having an entire nation cloned out of him, as it were? As Moses will say just a few verses later, God cannot go back on his promises to Abraham.

Before we get to Moses' response, I want to point out that all along in God's speech here, there have been hints that God wants Moses to intercede for the people. God wants Moses to be their mediator. God is motivating Moses to stand in the breach. The way God is treating Moses is similar to how a parent might motivate a child to clean up his room, as Phil Ryken notes: “Go ahead and leave your toys on the floor...It's okay—I'll clean them up for you...as soon as I get the trash can.” Of course that is a negative motivation, whereas God is here holding out the test of personal advancement: will Moses look out for himself, or will he intercede for a people that so thoroughly don't deserve it?

As it turns out, Moses passes this test with flying colors. Verses 11-13 are Moses' response to God. Moses uses three excellent arguments for why God should exercise mercy towards God's people. Notice a very striking fact: Moses never says that the people are innocent. Moses never defends the people's actions, as if they were correct. Moses was being a new kind of mediator: one who intercedes on behalf of the guilty party. Moses asks God to save the ungodly. Moses' concern in all this is God's glory, not his own self-aggrandizement. We see the humility of Moses shining through rather clearly. He could have taken God up on His offer at the end of verse 10, but the thought is very far from the mind of Moses.

The first argument Moses uses is God's salvation of the people in the past. This argument is presented in verse 11. Moses says that it was really the Lord's doing that the people were rescued from the land of Egypt, not his. In effect, Moses is saying that it would be kind of a waste to go through all the bother of rescuing the people from the

land of Egypt, only to kill them all off in the wilderness. Having saved them, it would make better sense to have mercy on them now so that God can continue His plan to bring them into the promised land.

The second argument has to do with God's reputation among the nations, particularly Egypt. Verse 12 is the presentation of this second argument. Moses is saying that God's reputation would suffer among the nations if God destroyed His people now. Why does God's reputation among the nations even matter? Well, it matters because God's plan all along is that the nations would be blessed through the seed of Abraham. If God destroyed His people now, that would such a plan in serious jeopardy! The Egyptians would then be able to scoff at God. God could save His people from Egypt, but He didn't have the power to save them from themselves. God's glory would suffer loss if God destroyed His people.

It cannot be denied, however, that Moses saves his best argument for last. God promised! God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He would bring their descendants to the promised land. Moses mentions the oath that God made, and not just any oath, but an oath in which God swore by Himself. If God *seemed* to have discounted the promise at the end of verse 10, when He offered to make a new nation out of Moses, Moses brings the old promise right back to the table.

Verse 14 shows us that Moses was successful at being the mediator. Now, this was what God intended all along. Some translations say "God repented," or, even worse "God changed His mind." The impression given by those translations is that God had been going to do one thing, but then Moses prevented Him from doing that, and so God had to change to plan B. Absolutely not! That is why we have been noticing the hints of grace all along: God wanted Moses to be the mediator for the people. God wanted to save the people through the mediatorship of Moses! It was a question of presenting the situation in such a way that the heart of the mediator would come alive, and show itself. Verse 14 should really be translated, "God had compassion regarding the harm which he said he would do to His people." The result was what God had planned all along! It wasn't plan B, but plan A!

All of this becomes very clearly relevant to us when we see that Jesus is the greater Moses, and does exactly what Moses did. Our great Mediator stands in the gap between the wrath of God and our own sin. As Phil Ryken imagines it, God says to His Son, "Go down, Jesus, go down. Go down because your people—the ones I gave you from all eternity—have become corrupt. They are living in sin. They have turned away from my law to worship other gods. And unless you intercede for them, they will surely be destroyed by my wrath." Jesus' response is three-fold, and mirrors Moses' three arguments: "Father, save them because of your mighty deeds of the past in saving your people; save them so that the world does not put you to scorn, but rather gives you glory and honor; and save them because you have promised to do so." Jesus received the same temptation, only from Satan, not from His Father. Satan promised Him all the kingdoms of the world without the cross. The kingdom without the cross. Jesus could make a new kingdom out of just Himself. But then all the people for whom Christ came would all die. The question was the same for Jesus: would He

manipulate the situation for His own personal benefit, or would He be the mediator that God wanted Him to be? Praise God that Jesus resisted that temptation, especially because it came from a far more sinister source than Moses had to face!

Because Jesus is our mediator, we can learn these things for our benefit. Firstly, we should never be stiff-necked! If we become like what we worship, then if we worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we will have soft necks that God can easily lead. When you receive rebuke that is biblical, and you know it, what is your response? If you get angry about it, the chances are that the rebuke was biblical, and that you are seeking to avoid the truth of it by attacking the messenger. We should be a people quick to repent, quick to apologize, and slow to accuse.

Secondly, what do you worship? What has the highest priority in your life? Remember that you will become like what you worship. If you worship pleasure, that will become your entire world. If you worship money, you will become a Scrooge. If you worship work, you will become a workaholic. If you worship relationships, then those relationships will define who you are. You become what you worship. Make sure that you remember the first commandment, and worship the right God.

Thirdly, notice the power of intercession. Moses' intercession is what God planned on using to turn aside His own wrath. Similarly with the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our intercession matters because that is what God uses to accomplish His plan. He doesn't have to do that, of course. God can just zap people into the kingdom of God, and He sometimes does that, as with the apostle Paul. However, far more often God uses the intercessory prayers of His people so that their faith will be strengthened. This means that our prayers matter! They are effective. They do not change God's mind, because God does not change His mind. However, they are what God uses to accomplish His plan.

Finally, will you be a person who seeks God's kingdom only for what you will get out of it? Will you seek to build your own little kingdom through God's kingdom? Will you ignore the glory of God and His reputation among the nations, as long as you are comfortable? Or is your first and foremost concern God's glory in all of life? Do not be put off by this way of expressing it, as if God's glory means bad things for you. God's glory is always the best thing for God's people. The easiest way to see that is to look straight at Jesus Christ. What He did was the most God-glorifying action in all of history, and what could possibly be more beneficial for us than Christ's person and work? For Jesus is the greater Moses, our great Mediator and Savior.