

Sermon 108, Stiffnecked People, Forgiving God, Exodus 32:7-14

Proposition: Israel's sin provoked God to want to destroy them, but Moses' intercession brought God to suspend His stated purpose and spare their lives.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last week how the golden calf functioned as an unholy cow, as an anti-Tabernacle in Israel's life. We also saw that the negative implies the positive, that the teaching of anti-Christ can tell us some helpful things about the true Christ. Well, tonight we move from the base of the mountain to the top of the mountain. There we see God's response to Israel's rebellion. Let's just say that it's extremely negative. He wants to destroy Israel, He describes Israel in seven different negative ways, and He even offers Moses the chance to be a new Abraham, almost a second Adam who can refound the people of God (though not the whole human race). But Moses intercedes as mediator, and God relents from His stated purpose, suspending the punishment of cutting off Israel altogether, for the sake of His promises to the patriarchs. What we'll see in this text is that Israel's sin provoked God to want to destroy them, but Moses' intercession brought God to suspend His stated purpose and spare their lives.

I. God's Verdict on Israel's Calf, vv. 7-10

Lest the narrator's disapproval in the preceding section left you in any doubt about what God thought of the brilliant bovine, he now lets us listen in God's verdict on it.

A. God Refuses to Call Moses' People His People, v. 7a

We have had the privilege of hearing God speak to Moses for most of the last thirteen chapters. Almost all of it has been legal and cultic material, sockets and bars and when fire breaks out in thorns and all the rest of it. But suddenly the tenor changes. God urgently addresses a new problem, a new sin, and in so doing repudiates His people by verbally thrusting them onto Moses. Sometimes you hear married people say things like this: "Go get your son." But God says "Go rescue your people." He even adds, "Whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt." Well, the book of Exodus has told us many times that it was Yahweh who brought Israel out of Egypt. Think, for instance, of the mission statement that God adds to the end of the directions for the tabernacle building: "And I will dwell among the sons 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" (Exo 29:45-46 NAS). He is Yahweh their God, He brought them out of Egypt, and He now rejects them and says "Moses, they're all yours."

And then He describes their sin in six evocative terms, with a climactic seventh.

B. God's Description of the People's Actions, v. 7b

None of these six descriptions is very flattering.

1. Corruption

The first is that the people have corrupted themselves. They are rotting, turning from wholeness to putrefaction. Again, this is not flattering, but it is an incredibly accurate description of what sin is and does. Sin corrupts. If you've ever watched the rotten spot spread on an apple or orange, that is roughly what's going on here. And that is what goes on every time you and I engage in idolatry. God sees us as corrupt. We use this term primarily to refer to the taking of bribes, saying things like "Ukraine scores even lower than Russia on the international corruption index." But in biblical usage, corruption means not only taking bribes, but all forms of moral degeneration.

2. Quickly turning aside from the way

The second way God describes Israel's sin with the calf is as quickly turning aside from the way. "The ways of the LORD" is a common phrase in Scripture. It trades on the metaphor of life as a journey. To walk in the ways of the LORD is to obey Him on your journey. It is to do what He wants, to walk the path that He has marked as morally correct. To turn aside from the way, then, is to leave the path and go into an immoral area. The right way is narrow, the wrong way broad. And Israel did not leave the path after a long, hard struggle against temptation. They were not bullied into it by Satan after a lifetime of following the path correctly. No. They turned aside *quickly*. If you know your own heart, brothers and sisters, you recognize that turning aside quickly is one of your specialties. I don't turn aside slowly. When I turn aside, I turn aside quickly. So did Israel. Yet this very quickness to leave the path, to turn out of the ways of the

LORD and onto our own ways, is damning. That, of course, is why God mentioned it to Moses. Israel turned aside quickly, not reluctantly.

3. Making a calf

God now proceeds to name the specific sin in which His people have indulged: they have made a calf. That is a direct violation of the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” But a graven image is exactly what they made.

By the way, in our contention with Rome and the Lutherans over the numbering of the commandments, we can say that this story of the golden calf centers around the sin not of worshiping an idol, but of making an idol. Both sins were committed, of course. But God highlights the making as a sin.

4. Worshiping the calf

But He immediately goes to mention the central sin, which was to worship the calf. God specifically mentions this to Moses. Making the calf is bad; worshiping it is worse.

Making room in your life for money, power, pleasure, and the rest is bad. Worshiping them as your gods is even worse.

5. Sacrificing to the calf

As a specific example of the kind of worship Israel performed for the calf, God mentions sacrifice. They did not merely clap their hands and say “Oh, great calf!” They actually sacrificed to it — probably sheep and goats, but maybe even bulls. You would think that a bull would not be pleased by the sacrifice of a bull. Wouldn’t it like corn and hay better? But Israel is willing to give valuable livestock to this golden bull in yet another example of the corrupting and deceitful power of sin.

6. Ascribing Yahweh’s saving acts to the calf

Another thing Israel does is to ascribe Yahweh’s saving acts to the calf. This is the god that brought them out of Egypt — or so they claim. It’s not true. It’s a gigantic lie. But they say it anyway. That’s what sin does. It makes you look at an inanimate object and ascribe supernatural power to it. Again, have you ever done this? The thing you just have to have, the experience you worship, the pleasure you addictively and compulsively seek — all of these things are lies just like Israel’s lie when they said “This is your god who brought you out of Egypt.” The calf did not vanquish Pharaoh, split the sea, provide manna in the desert, give instructions for the tabernacle. But sin makes you think that it did. When you’re in the grip of sin, you actually believe all that stuff.

C. God’s Climactic 7th Description of the People: Stiffnecked, v. 9

Well, the six sins the people have committed culminate in a climactic seventh description from Yahweh Himself: The people are stiffnecked.

What does that mean? It means that they will not bow, they will not bend their head, they will not submit to outside authority. They hate being guided by someone else, even by Moses, even by God.

Brothers and sisters, that is a terrifying adjective. To be stiffnecked is something you absolutely do not want. To be stiffnecked is to be a fool. It is to hate rebuke, to refuse to listen, to

be so sure you're right that you blow off and ignore everyone who's trying to warn you, who's trying to help you, who's trying to guide you. Israel had Moses, Aaron, and Hur. Hur vanished, Moses was up the mountain, and Aaron was more than willing to help make the calf idol. And so no one was trying to bend their stiff necks. No one was trying to force them into line.

D. God's Expressed Desires

In light of the above, God expresses two desires, two ways in which He says He would like to respond.

1. To Destroy Israel

The first is to destroy Israel. He will cut them off, take their lives, annihilate them except for Moses and perhaps Moses' family.

2. To Make Moses a Great Nation

That does not mean abandoning the plan for saving the world — or at least, not entirely abandoning it. Obviously the plan would need serious modifications. Rather than becoming the new Adam, Moses would become the new Abraham, another father of many nations and of a great nation.

Now, in light of the outcome, where God drops these expressed desires, what are we to make of them? We must posit, first of all, that God had not seriously made up His mind to destroy Israel. One commentator compares this statement "Let me alone" to God telling Moses "You won't enter the promised land." When Moses tries to wheedle his way into the promised land after all, God's response is utterly emphatic. There is absolutely no way. But here, God's response is not so emphatic.

What does it mean for God to wish something? We don't know, because we don't know what it means for ourselves to wish something. I can't explain exactly what a wish is and how it relates to a settled decision. But I can tell you that I know the difference, and that you do too. Wishing something and making up your mind are two very different cognitive acts. God utters a wish or desire here. He has not made up His mind to destroy Israel.

II. Moses' Intercession, vv. 11-13

And Moses recognizes this. The words "Let me alone" stand as a sort of invitation, a half-promise that if Moses doesn't leave Him alone, God will not destroy Israel and will not start over with Moses as the new Abraham.

Based on that half-promise, Moses immediately begins interceding for his people. He mounts three arguments to back up his main request. That request is not "Please totally forgive Israel and remove all consequences spiritual and temporal that this sin has incurred." The request is rather "Change thy mind about doing harm to thy people."

What arguments does Moses deploy as Mediator? And, before we answer that question, let me just observe the reasonableness of God. He does not insist on His own wishes. He is willing to hear Moses. He is willing to listen to arguments and abandon His wishes in light of them. That is pretty amazing. In fact, it's incredibly amazing. We all know human beings who are unreasonable and petty and unwilling to listen to arguments detailing why they should

change. But the Almighty is not petty like that. It is almost as though He wants to be persuaded to spare Israel and continue with His plan to save the world through the seed of Abraham.

A. God, You Redeemed Israel, v. 11

How, then, does Moses intercede? He asks the Lord two “why” questions: Why are you angry? Why would you discredit yourself in front of the Egyptians, after just showing them who you are?”

Even aside from the way they affected God, if we may use that terminology, I want you to notice how powerful this form of dialogue is. God asked Jonah whether he was right to be angry. “Why are you angry, Jonah? Do you have a good reason to be angry?” Long before God did it to Jonah, though, Moses did it to God. “God, why are you angry?”

This question seems rather odd. “I’m angry because your people have corrupted themselves, and done six other terrible things. They are a stiff-necked people and that makes me angry!”

We can imagine God responding that way. That’s how I would respond. Yes, it is right to be angry when my place has been taken by some bull!

But God just listens to the question. He does not answer it; He does not defend Himself to Moses, or explain why He’s angry. After all, He just did that. But He does clearly listen to Moses’ other point, which is that God is already very deeply implicated with Israel. God brought Israel out of Egypt. God had already saved this stiffnecked people. He had already intervened to protect them from Pharaoh’s wrath. Moses doesn’t say “Why would you save us to kill us?” But he clearly implies that God knew what Israel was like before He saved them. This is not some new thing. This is what the people have always been.

B. God, You Will Be Discredited before the Egyptians, v. 12

His second argument is even more explicit. Why would you discredit yourself as savior in front of the Egyptians? Have you ever thought of appealing to God for His church this way? “Father, why let the church sin so badly when the world is watching our stiffnecked stupidity?” The Egyptians would charge God with evil if He destroyed His people. Moses does not say that God would be evil, but that pagans would think that He was evil. Now, in general God does not make His decisions based on what people will think. But He wanted to show Egypt that He is Yahweh. He says over and over “Then they will know that I am Yahweh.” Is Yahweh the kind of God who would kill His people in the mountains because they fell into idolatry? No, He is not.

C. God, You Swore by Yourself, v. 13

The third and most powerful argument Moses uses relates not to God’s prior actions, nor to His reputation, but to His oath. “God, you swore to multiply the seed of Abraham and to give them the promised land. If you destroy them now, you can’t keep that promise.” If God had wiped out the line of promise before Jesus came, then He would have broken His promise, or at least severely damaged it.

God swore by the most sacred thing imaginable — Himself.

D. Central Request: Therefore, Don't Harm Your People!, v. 12c

And based on God's covenant, Moses intercedes with a request to Him not to harm His people. The request is not to forgive all their sins, or to never mention the golden calf again. Obviously, Scripture does mention it again more than once. But Israel did not perish. Only 3,000 fell that day (as we will see next Sunday).

III. God Suspends the Punishment, v. 14

And God listened to Moses' mediation. He suspended the punishment. No longer did He wish to destroy His people and start over with Moses. Instead, He continued and continues to keep His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. He had given Abraham a mighty seed in the singular seed, who is Christ.

The contrast between the seven sins of Israel and the three arguments that moved the Almighty could not be more instructive. Israel is weak and fallible; Israel fails. But when Israel fails, God succeeds. He delivers His people, not only from Egypt, but even from sin and its punishment. What an incredible, faithful Father!

Brothers and sisters, when you've sinned, go back to God. Recognize that Jesus is mediating for you with arguments even more effective than those that Moses used to move God. God may wish to wipe you out in a certain sense, just like you might say "If my husband did that I'd kill him." But far more settled and sure is His decision to listen to the Mediator's pleas and to save His people who trust in Him.

You may have worshiped a golden calf this week. But the forgiving God is mightier than the stiffnecked people. In Him, you are saved. Amen.