

## **Studies in Exodus No. 38**

**Exodus 32:15-35**

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We considered the first 14 verses of chapter 32 last Lord's Day evening and drew from them the lesson of the primacy of faith in salvation and life. Israel did not have faith – she did not know or trust in the Lord, Yahweh, her God – and her want of faith was the explanation of what she did in rejecting Yahweh and turning to the idols of her time and place. Her behavior was the inevitable consequence of her lack of true faith. Now we proceed with the narrative and take up the consequences of Israel's idolatry.

### **Text Comment**

- v.15 This is the only place in the Bible where the fact that the tablets were written on both sides is noted.
- v.16 This emphasis on the divine origin of the writing is important for what comes next.
- v.17 Remember that in 24:13 (in the last narrative section preceding this one), we were told that Joshua had accompanied Moses for part of his climb up the mountain. Apparently he had remained on the mountain side and Moses had collected him on his way down. Joshua, being a military man, immediately associates so great a noise with battle.
- v.18 Moses is obviously citing a poem already familiar that serves as a response to Joshua's concern – remember he has not been on the conversation between the Lord and Moses – over the noise he has heard. It isn't victory; it isn't defeat – isn't the sound of battle as Joshua had thought – it's something else.
- v.19 The situation as Moses saw it was worse even than the description of the people's sin that the Lord had given him when he was still at the top of the mountain (v. 8). The Lord had told him that Israel had made a golden bull, but Moses was not prepared to see them cavorting – not doubt some sort of fertility rite is being enacted – and reveling in their idolatry.

Moses had been all this while enjoying a more intimate communion with the Almighty than we can imagine. He had been enjoying what would later be called the "beatific vision." Suddenly to be faced with this crude idolatry and offensive paganism was more than he could bear. These people were not to be given the extraordinary divine gift that he bore in his hands and in his righteous indignation he broke the tablets.

The breaking of the tablets is not simply an act of unrestrained anger. It is a ceremonial act. The breaking of the tablets, on which were written a summary of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, meant that the covenant had been broken by Israel's sin. Moses was acting on Yahweh's behalf to indicate that the promises God had made to Israel were now forfeit because of her sin. Yahweh was abrogating the covenant he had

made with his people. It wasn't the tablets that were shattered, in the first place, but Yahweh's relationship with Israel.

- v.20 Making the Israelites drink the gold dust was intended to impress upon them the utter powerlessness of the idol they had made; it was a demonstration of complete impotence so far as the idol was concerned. Compared to the God who parted the waters of the *Yam Suph* the idol is less than nothing, the grit in our drink. The breaking up of idols is something that was also required in the law (23:24).
- v.21 "One look at his brother's face had told Moses where the blame lay." [Ellison, 173] But Moses was willing to believe that Aaron had acted under pressure.
- v.24 It is worth remembering that according to Deut. 9:20, it was only Moses' intercession that spared Aaron from execution.
- v.25 The NIV's "running wild" is literally "let loose." That is, "loose" in the sense of unbinding or letting loose of long hair. They were "letting their hair down" as we would say. Here the sense is of letting loose of inhibitions in an orgy. Bad morals are the inevitable result of idolatry.
- v.26 Obviously there were those among the people who had not gone over to the new calf worship and had remained loyal to Yahweh, the invisible God, with his strong moral demands.
- v.27 In Exodus 22:20 we read, among the laws of that section: "Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord must be destroyed." Moses now applies that law to Israel, using volunteers to carry out the executions. The clear implication is that those who were actively responsible for the introduction of this idolatry and those who participated in the worship were the ones singled out for punishment, not the people in general. "Brother" often means "fellow-Israelite" in the OT.
- v.28 The smaller number is probably to be taken as evidence of a restricted judgment, perhaps an assault on the ringleaders and those guilty of the worst excess. [Alter, 499] There would in all likelihood have been more who either participated or welcomed the bull-worship, but the judgment was representative and exemplary.
- v.29 The Levites were not free of the taint of the sin and so some of them were executed as well. So the "all the Levites" of v. 26 means, contextually, all who were not implicated in the crime.

The NIV's "you have been set apart" is literally "you have been ordained..." It was the Levites' zeal for the honor of the Lord and their willingness to count all their other relationships as unimportant in comparison that accounted for their special calling as the ministry of Israel. Jesus would say a similar thing, you remember, about not being his disciple unless one were willing to hate his father, mother, sister, brother, etc. To this

point in the narrative there had been no setting apart of the tribe of Levi for its priestly role.

v.30 Once again, Moses does not excuse, minimize or extenuate Israel's sin. He knows that forgiveness is absolutely necessary. Instead he promises to plead for that forgiveness.

“Make atonement” in this case does not mean offer a sacrifice, but, as we shall see, to offer intercessory prayer, like the prayer Moses had offered on Israel's behalf before he left the top of the mountain (vv. 11-13).

v.31 Apparently Moses reascended the mountain.

v.32 “the book you have written” suggests something like the NT's “book of life,” the register of the righteous, those who are saved. In that case, Moses would be saying something like what Paul says in Romans 9 about wishing himself accursed for the sake of his countrymen.

v.33 In this case, however, the offer is refused. The individual sinner must answer for his own sin. Moses cannot atone for the sins of another and that fact opens the way to the expectation of the coming of one who could! The Lord will continue to lead and provide for his people; he will take them to the Promised Land, but he will reserve punishment for those who have betrayed him so defiantly. He will not destroy the entire people here at the mountain, as he first threatened to do, but things will never be the same either. Of course, this was not the first and would not be the last time Israel demonstrated her lack of faith in the Lord. And for this and other such instances of faithlessness, this generation of Israelites would not see the Promised Land (in either respect: she would not enter Canaan when Israel did some 40 years later and she would not enter the eternal rest of God, as the author of Hebrews says bluntly in his chapter 4). The point is that Israel was not acting “out of character” in worshipping before the golden bull; she was reverting to form. Israel dancing before the idol is the true and authentic people.

v.35 Is this another exemplary punishment (a further scourge inflicted on the people by the Lord) or a reference to the later punishment referred to in the previous verse? The chapter ends with many questions unanswered: What will Yahweh do? What is Israel's future? What is to become of the broken tablets and the covenant they represent?

The concluding summary blames, once again, both the people and Aaron.

Among the other fundamental perspectives presented or illustrated in this narrative of Israel and the golden bull, are those regarding sin and the divine wrath that is visited upon it.

*The narrative we read this evening primarily concerns the aftermath of Israel's sin but it includes commentary on it as well.*

Think, for example, of the nature of sin as expressed in the account of Israel “running wild” or “letting loose” in v. 25. There is a great deal of dismal human reality in that word. Think about

sin as a “letting loose” or a “breaking out.” Is this not the case always and in every way? Sin is a power within us that wants to break out but is kept under at least some control much of the time. It is a corrupting power, a degrading power, a destructive power, an ugliness, a foul, bitter, grasping urge that, when let loose, always results in inhuman, bestial, and animal-like behavior. One never does what is good, what is beautiful, what is loving, what is life-giving when he or she “lets loose” or “breaks out.” It is more like cutting open an abscess and letting the puss run out.

When Israel let loose they made an idol, the image of a bull, and began dancing – probably in various stages of nakedness – around the statue she made. When she let loose she did not become wise but stupid, not pure but dirty, not self-controlled but wild, not worthy of respect, but a laughing stock. And, if you stop and think about it, that is what always happens when sin breaks out...*always!*

To be sure, it doesn't not always seem so to everyone. A man can sin and be admired for it by others. A man can sin and think himself clever and successful for having done so. And a great many people in our day indulge in revelry and think themselves the happier for having done so and not a few so-called experts in our culture will tell you that such revelry is actually healthy for a human personality.

But it is not so; the Bible says plainly it is not so; and the observation of human life confirms the Bible's teaching. Sin is invariably the breaking out or the letting loose of something low and unworthy and destructive that is within us. And when sin lets loose we are invariably diminished and so too those around us. Sin does not elevate human life, it lowers it; it does not adorn it, it mars it; it does not bring it to its best expression, it turns it into something unworthy and unhealthy; it does not purify it, it defiles it, it does not build it up, it disintegrates it.

Christian theologians have expressed this point in their descriptions of sin or in the terms they choose to describe its essential feature. Some saw sin at its bottom as *concupiscentia*, or evil or corrupt desire. It is every manner of false desire that blooms when sin is let loose. No doubt the abiding popularity of fertility worship in the ANE was due in large part to the sensual excitement that was part of that worship. But it is not hard to see such desires lurking beneath so many of our sinful thoughts and acts. The other term widely employed as a description of sin in its fundamental nature is *superbia* or pride, the enthronement of the self, the worship of the self.

No doubt both ideas lie at the root of all sin. In Genesis 3 these two accents stand side by side: the desire to be like God – *superbia* – and the attractiveness of the fruit – *concupiscentia* – conspire to bring about the Fall. In 1 John 2:16 we have sin described as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes” – *concupiscentia* – and “the pride of life” – *superbia*. [H. Berkhof, *The Christian Faith*, 189-192] That is what sin is *and there is nothing attractive in that description*. Nothing attractive whether we are talking about the common sins of ordinary life – the little lies, the unkind remarks, the losing of our temper, the shaving of our taxable income on our return – did you see in the paper last week the estimate that American taxpayers owe some \$1 trillion more in taxes than they pay – the lustful thoughts we indulge, the jealousy and envy that we feel toward others and sometimes express, the discontent and complaining spirit, the laziness – or whether we are talking about the larger sins that men and women commit – the big lies, the

significant cheating, the promiscuity or adultery, the trampling on someone else in order to get one's way, the unwillingness to take up one's responsibilities for a spouse or one's children or one's employees or one's company, the thefts that we are so often committing, stealing from others by not giving to them what they ought to receive from us, and so on.

That is what sin is. *We are* what Israel *was*, dancing around that ridiculous stature of a bull. Whenever we sin we are as uncommonly stupid looking, undignified, small, ungrateful, lustful, unworthy as they were. But we live in a sinful world that conspires with us every day and all day long to forget what we really look like, how absurd, disgusting and corrupting our behavior is, how damaging to others, how supremely unworthy of our maker. We rub shoulders with other sinners like ourselves and we agree to accept one another's behavior as normal, rather than as sub-normal, as acceptable, rather than what it is, unacceptable, as inevitable, rather than what it is, the choices we make because we find holiness so difficult and sinful revelry an easy pleasure.

And when we cannot any longer hide the fact that we did something unworthy, disreputable, shameful, we do what Aaron did: we make excuses. Aaron used both the excuses that everyone typically uses. First, he blamed others. It was the Israelites: it was *their* idea and they put pressure on me. I had to do something. If it hadn't been for them none of this would have happened. Like Adam in Eden he shifted the responsibility for his crime to someone else. Second, he took refuge in his helplessness and in the inevitability of his behavior. There is dark humor there at the end of v. 24. The narrator fully expects us to realize how bizarre Aaron's explanation really is and how silly it sounds. Did he expect anyone to believe that? Well, do we? Believe me; I hear a lot of excuses. People who cannot deny that they have done shameful things will still try to persuade me that they weren't alone to blame, perhaps not even chiefly to blame. "I know I did wrong, *but...*"

We Northwesterners may remember a prominent U.S. Senator from Oregon being accused of sexual harassment in the early 1990s. There is another instance of the nature of sin – a desire inside that, once let loose, produces what is harmful, shameful, and destructive.

"The senator's response was typical and revealing. He first denied the charges outright. He then attacked the credibility of his accusers. Next, he issued an extraordinary apology. Faced with charges that for years he had been kissing and groping his staff members...faced with such charges from sixteen women, the senator declared that he had never intended 'to make anyone feel uncomfortable' Still, he advised the media that he would 'seek professional help to see if his alleged behavior was related to his use of alcohol.'

In other words, the senator claimed that nothing happened, but in any case, he meant no harm by it, and, regardless, he might have been drunk at the time and so unaware of the harm he was doing by the thing that he didn't do. [C. Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*, 101-102]

We witnessed a similar evasion of responsibility this week in the case of the homosexual Episcopalian bishop, Gene Robinson, who was admitted into an alcohol rehab program. He didn't used to believe that alcoholism was a disease, he says, but now he does.

The old public evasion was to condemn for only a few sins, or even just for one, and give everyone a pass on the others. So Dorothy Sayers once wrote:

“A man may be greedy and selfish; spiteful, cruel, jealous and unjust; violent and brutal; grasping and unscrupulous, and a liar; stubborn and arrogant; stupid, morose, and dead to every noble instinct – and still we are ready to say of him that he is not an immoral man. I am reminded of a young man who once said to me with perfect simplicity: ‘I did not know there were seven deadly sins; please tell me the names of the other six.’ [In Coomes, 89]

Or, as may be still more common, certain civic virtue is used to excuse, at least in the conscience, sometimes horrific private corruption and betrayal. In her widely circulated book, published in 1988, Sylvia Fraser tells of the tributes paid to her father at his funeral. He was a Christian man who didn’t smoke or drink...who helped his wife with the grocery shopping, and who never took the Lord’s name in vain. He was polite, a good neighbor, who paid his bills punctually. But he also sexually molested his daughter from the time she was four to the time she was twelve and threatened his little girl if she were to tell their secret to anyone first with the loss of her toys, then with the killing of her kitty, and finally with sending her away to an orphanage. Or think of the fine, upstanding Lutheran churchman, father, and good neighbor who turned out to be Wichita, Kansas’ serial murderer. And, of course, all of us are tempted immediately to take comfort in the fact that we have never murdered another human being or sexually molested a child. But, of course, as Jesus teaches us, we have done those things or their equivalent times without number in our hearts. And we have neglected to do the reverse of those things – love our neighbor as ourselves – still many more times than that. There is that in every one of us that we know is shameful, small, ugly, utterly unworthy of a human being. Our trifling virtues are not enough, not nearly enough, to set that evil aside: a point we prove to ourselves by doing our best to keep so much of what is true about us, our hearts, our words, our deeds, hidden from the sight of others. “Integrity on one side of our character,” Newman said, “is no voucher for integrity on the other side.” And we could go further to say, a little bit of relatively easy virtue will convince no one that we should be given a pass for our inexcusable vice. [For some of the above, Plantinga, 46-47]

And what happens on the individual, personal level happens on the level of culture and society as well. Grandiloquent excuses are now the order of the day in western culture. Sociological and psychological determinism is widely taught on the American university campus. We lack morally significant freedom; our behavior is predestined in our genes, in our upbringing, and in our environment. And, of course, moral relativism means that no one is in a position to condemn the moral choices that I have made. He or she has no right. To do so is to imagine that there are such things as moral absolutes.

G.K. Chesterton had something to say about these modern excuses and evasions.

“Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.... The strongest saints and the strongest skeptics alike took positive evil as the starting point of their argument. If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can

only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do [i.e. a good God would not make a world full of such evil people]; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. The new theologians seem to think it a highly [rational] solution to deny the cat.” [*Orthodoxy*, 217]

But, of course, such evasions work only some of the time and for some people. Everyone at least some of the time knows that right and wrong exist and makes his judgments accordingly. If they won't condemn a person for pornography or promiscuity or adultery, or even cheating on one's taxes – for who can dictate morals for someone else – they will nevertheless sternly condemn people for smoking and other forms of air pollution or for sexism or religious bigotry. And the excuses offered by those condemned for those sins are just like the excuses offered by the first group for the others: pathetic, selfish, contradictory, and unconvincing.

Now the old Christian writers used to ring the changes on the foul, bitter, loathsome nature and fruit of sin. I have classic works of this type on my shelf from the Puritans: Ralph Venning's *The Plague of Plagues*; John Owen's, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*; and, of course, what are John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or *The Holy War* but extensive studies in the dismal realities of sin. In his *Letters to Malcolm* [97-98] C.S. Lewis writes,

“I've been reading Alexander Whyte.... He brought me violently face to face with a characteristic of Puritanism which I had almost forgotten. For him, one essential symptom of the regenerate life is a permanent and permanently horrified, perception of one's natural and (it seems) unalterable corruption. The true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.”

But we hear very little of this any more in our culture and Christians are hearing little of it in their churches. They are not made to see what lies beneath and what ugliness surfaces when that desire and that pride are let loose. They are not being hunted out of their excuses, their extenuations, and their mitigations and forced to face themselves in the cold light of day. They are not being educated in the subtleties of the heart and put on guard against the thousand and one deceptions people perpetrate against themselves in an effort to avoid facing the truth about themselves and, in particular, in an effort to judge themselves according to God's judgment but rather according to their own. The two standards, of course, are wildly different from one another and Paul warns us that “they who judge themselves by themselves are not wise.”

And the problem is that when people hear nothing about these things, when they are not trained to see their sin for what it is, the disgusting, repulsive, destructive thing that it is, they come to accounts of the ferocity of the Lord's judgment on such sin, such as we read in vv. 27-29 and again in vv. 34-35, and are taken aback. The punishment seems altogether too severe, too harsh. And the reason is that they no longer have any sense of the holiness of God or of the viciousness and stupidity of human sin. We lose those things very easily, we get them back only with difficulty. But if we can't take seriously God's wrath against *our* sin then, inevitably, we will find that the cross makes no sense to us either; for what is the cross but terrible, terrible punishment, born in our place. And that is why it is so dangerous for the church to forget the importance of convincing us over and over again of our sin and our guilt before God and of

making us realize how unworthy we are, of hunting us out of all our excuses and evasions, and of holding our noses to the stench until we are sure that nothing is necessary in all the world but that we should find forgiveness with God and nothing so wonderful as the hope that we have in Jesus Christ that someday we will be sinless, like Christ himself.

For that reason we are wise to pause, whenever we are given the opportunity, whether in the pages of God's holy Word or in the observation of life, to reckon with the true nature of human sin and, once we have become ourselves thoroughly disgusted with it, imagine what God must think of it, who is holiness itself and against whom all these sins, all of them – sins of thought, of word, and of deed – are first committed.