EXODUS 32: Exchanging the Truth About God For a Lie

In Romans Chapter 1 Paul writes that unrighteous men suppress the truth about God. He says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Rom 1:22) So as we read and study out of Exodus 32 this morning, it must be noted that the problem that the people of Israel had then remains a problem today. People are still sinful, deceived by Satan and continue to exchange the truth about God for a lie.

Two weeks ago we looked at God’s giving of the 10 commandments. In Deuteronomy Ch.4 Moses summarizes what took place. Addressing the people of Israel a whole generation later, he tells them, “Take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children-- how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb [Mt. Horeb is the same mountain as Mt.Sinai], the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words, so that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children [also to fear God].’ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, that is, the 10 commandments, and He wrote them on 2 tablets of stone [that’s in today’s lesson]. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.” (Deut 4:9-14)

After God gave the 10 commandments Moses went back up the mountain to meet with God and as we come to Exodus ch 32 he’s been gone for nearly 6 weeks! Moses is up there receiving the laws from God which he will then bring back to the people, all the directives given from the end of Ch 20 all the way thru Ch 31. So that’s the setting for this lesson.

READ Exodus 32:1

The people have grown impatient. They’ve waited for Moses long enough. For all they know he could be dead! So they go to Aaron, their spiritual leader – the one Moses put in charge while he was gone. They’re demanding. “Up!” They’re selfish, “Make US gods who shall go before US.” They’re forgetful. They’ve already forgotten God’s 1st commandment. They tell Aaron to make them gods who shall go before them. But God has told them, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” The people claim that Moses is the one who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. But God said to them, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt…” The people are man-focused rather than God-focused. In fact the people of Israel appear to have abandoned God altogether. These people have a real spiritual problem! But really, when you think about it, they aren’t that much different from people today, are they?

READ Exodus 32:2-3

They got this gold during their exodus from Egypt. God intervened on behalf of His people and the scripture says, “they plundered the Egyptians.”

READ Exodus 32:4-6

The creation of a golden calf violates God’s 2nd commandment – “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” The people also create a worship environment which is not God sanctioned or directed. The people come up with a format of worship that pleases THEM and makes THEM feel good. The worship they devise is all about them! It’s not about God.

Not only are they violating the first 2 commandments but they are also violating the 3rd commandment, profaning God’s name, His character. How? By attributing to this man-made idol what God Himself did for them! The people loudly proclaim proudly to each other, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” One commentary I looked at suggests that the form of a calf indicates the kind of god the people want. Remember they are an agricultural society. A calf [the Hebrew word literally means “a young ox”] represents that which is useful to them, that which is there at their disposal whenever they needed it. And this god won’t bother them or make any moral demands. That’s the kind of god they want. They want a god they can see, not an invisible God. One who won’t get angry when they don’t obey him. Remember the Deuteronomy passage I read earlier? Moses said, “You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice…” Here we see that the people of Israel prefer to have a god with NO voice at all and with a form that they CAN see with their own eyes. They have exchanged the one true God for a false one.

Well, that’s what’s going on at the foot of the mountain. The scene now shifts back to Moses and God at the top of Mount Sinai…

READ Exodus 32:7-9

God is fully aware of what the people are up to and He informs Moses. He calls them as a “stiff-necked” people. The NASB uses the word “obstinate.” They’re stubborn! No matter what God says or does, the people just will not learn. They refuse to trust and obey the Lord.

And then God makes a statement in v 10 that seems out of character for Him. It’s one of those head-scratching verses…

READ Exodus 32:10

Wow! Do you realize what God’s saying here? “Let me just destroy the whole bunch of them. And I’ll start all over again with you, Moses.” To say that God is angry would be an understatement. His wrath we are told is burning hot! By the way, God certainly could have destroyed them. There’s precedent for it. Remember, He once destroyed the entire earth with a flood. He wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone. So God is perfectly capable of wiping out 2 million Israelites if He so chooses. But that just makes no sense at all – not if you have been reading the story of the Bible up to this point. And Moses picks up on that. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people before God. Notice what He says…

READ Exodus 32:11-12

Moses makes 3 arguments as he appeals to God. (1) v 11, “Do you want to negate everything you’ve done for this people. Are you going to abandon them now?” (2) v 12, “God, what are Your enemies going to think if You destroy Your own people? The Egyptians will gloat when they hear about it!” But the third and best argument is in v 13…

READ Exodus 32:13

“God, remember Your promise to Abraham?” (Gen 22) Here’s the promise God made immediately after the hand of Abraham had been stopped from killing his son Isaac: “By myself I have sworn…because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Gen 22:15-18) And God later reaffirmed this promise to Isaac [Gen 26] and to Jacob [Gen 28]. Notice in his argument that Moses uses Jacob’s covenant name of Israel as he reminds God of His covenant promise.

Moses appeals to God on the basis of who God is, His character. He is One who keeps His promises. Moses doesn’t make an appeal based on God’s justice or even His love, but on His character – “You are a God who keeps His promise and will finish what You started.” Philippians 1:6 says, “And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” That’s just who God is!

READ Exodus 32:14

Moses’ intercession works. God changes His mind, He relented from destroying the people.

So tell me, do you believe prayer can make a difference? Our prayers, our intercessions on behalf of others could persuade God. We see an example of that here in this passage [Abraham negotiating w/ God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah; Hezekiah asking God to spare his life; Amos pleading Israel’s cause, asking for forgiveness and requesting God to stay His hand of judgment, Nineveh’s repentance following the preaching of Jonah]

Psalm 106:45 references this conversation between God and Moses on Mount Sinai. It says, “For their sake He remembered His covenant, and relented according to the abundance of His steadfast love.”

READ Exodus 32:15-18

Apparently Joshua has been with Moses at least for part of the 40 days that he was up on the mountain. We know this from Exodus 24:13. Joshua being a military leader would have been familiar with the sounds of battle, the commotion caused by a large group. But this commotion sounds strange. It’s not the normal sound of battle. It involves singing. He doesn’t know what it is. It turns out to be the sound of a raucous worship service as the people worship the golden calf.

READ Exodus 32:19-20

Moses is filled with that same righteous indignation that God had. In a a fit of rage he destroys the tablets. Moses then proceeds to destroy the golden calf. He doesn’t merely destroy it. Burning the calf would have sufficed to do that. He goes further. He grinds it up into fine powder and then scatters it on the water and makes the people drink it. You know it must have tasted awful!

In the next few verses Moses demands that Aaron explain how such wickedness could have occurred while he was in charge. Aaron offers a weak and ridiculous explanation. It reminds me of the reply Adam gave to God after his sin in the Garden of Eden. Just like Adam blamed the woman for what he did, here Aaron blames the people. He won’t take responsibility for his own sin. Despite Moses’ return to the camp and all that has happened since then apparently many of the people are so worked up that they have kept right on with their out-of-control worship oblivious to what’s been going on. It’s this bunch that Moses targets next.

READ Exodus 32:25-26

The people are out of control and are disgracing God to His enemies. Moses draws a line in the sand and one group, the Levites, steps forward and by that action they declare they are on the Lord’s side. The text doesn’t mention anyone else who stepped forward. Just the Levites

READ Exodus 32:27

Moses directs them to kill the people in the camp who are still engaged in their evil worship. You know it had to be difficult on the Levites to go around and kill their brothers, their companions, their neighbors. But these wicked Israelites, even though they are blood kin and close friends, have to be destroyed lest the whole camp fall under God’s judgment. This purging is a necessary action.

READ Exodus 32:28-29

Up to this point God has given Moses directives for the tabernacle, for worship, for sacrifices and for the priesthood (Aaron and his sons). But it is this moment here in Exodus 32 where Moses reveals that the Levites, the entire tribe of Levi, will become the priestly tribe, set apart for God’s service. He says to the Levites “you have been ordained for the service of the Lord.” The curse placed on the tribe of Levi back in Genesis 49 has now been reversed. The actions of the Levites, though costly in terms of human life (3000 Israelites were killed), produced God’s blessing on them.

READ Exodus 32:30

“Atonement” for sin. What an amazing concept! To atone for sins means to cover, to satisfy the wrath of a holy God against sin. God directed Moses exactly how this is to be done in Exodus Chapters 29 and 30. We’re only in Exodus 32, so this is a brand new concept to Moses. So how was atonement to be accomplished? By the sacrifice of an animal, a sin offering, and the sprinkling of the animal’s blood around and on the altar.

As the chapter closes Moses returns up the mountain to the Lord to deal with the sins of the people. God lets Moses know that each person is responsible for their own sins. Moses can’t take the punishment for someone else’s sin. Moses wants to, but God won’t allow it. Each person bears the penalty themselves. Verse 35 mentions a plague God sends on the people – further judgment against the people’s idolatrous sin. According to 1 Corinthians 10:8, about 20,000 more people died that day.

Application: God takes sin very seriously. And it must be dealt with. I started today’s lesson by reading from Romans Chapter 1. I’m going to end back in Romans…

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom 1:18-20)

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man…” (Rom 2:1)

“He will render to each one according to his works.” (Rom 2:6)

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Rom 3:10-12)

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

For nearly 3 chapters in the Book of Paul gives the bad news – we’re all sinners facing the wrath of a holy God. But in the very next verse the whole tone changes…and herein lies the good news.

[For all] “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood [atonement], to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance [self-control, holding back] he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Rom 3:24-26)

Paul then uses Abraham as an example… “That is why [Abraham’s] faith was counted to him as righteousness. But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Rom 4:22-25) Paul says that Abraham was justified back in his day by his faith in God and we are justified today by our faith in Christ. Justification has always been by faith, never by works.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 5:1)

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, 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.” (Rom 5:8-9)

The holy wrath of God against sin, which includes our sin, it had to be dealt with, and that was done thru the shedding of blood (God’s gracious provision), ultimately thru the blood of Jesus, His death on the cross, and thru our faith in Him and we He did, we are justified and saved from the wrath of God.

That’s good news and worth singing about!