

Exodus 32: The Holiness of God

Leader Guide 10/26/09



PLEASE NOTE! – In the coming weeks, Summit Church will be studying Exodus 19-34 during corporate worship and in small groups. While the small groups will study these texts in order, the sermon may not correspond to the precise chapter week by week. However, the themes that pervade both sermon and small group will overlap considerably over the next several weeks. On Sundays and throughout the week, the goal is to grow in our understanding and respond rightly as a church to the Holy God who appeared to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Also, please note a new section- a prayer guide based on the themes of this text.

Context: Exodus 32 contains one of the most famous and heinous sins in the entire Bible. Just days before the events in Exodus 32, the Israelites had heard the voice of God from the awesome presence on the mountain that forbade them from making an idol (Ex. 19-20). They agreed to live by God's laws and so honor Him as their only God. They confirmed their promise of obedience with a blood ceremony (Ex. 24). They had seen God do powerful miracles to rescue them and keep them alive (Ex. 6-18). But, when they did not hear from either God or his spokesman for just a short while (Moses), their anxiousness led them to forsake their God and the covenant they made with Him (32:1).

The covenant that God graciously brought to the people was now put in jeopardy. The people had not lived up to its stipulations. According to the covenant laws in chapters 20-23 and the blood ceremony that the people used to confirm their obedience to the covenant in chapter 24:1-9, the whole people of Israel deserved death for this sin. The tension in the narrative leaves the reader to ask: how can a Holy and Just God remain in relationship with this sinful nation? Over the course of chapters 32-34, God and Moses have a series of conversations whereby God reestablishes the covenant. Moses intercedes for the people by appealing to God's covenant promises to Abraham (Ex. 32:13) and by pleading to God that His presence would remain with the people. Exodus closes with God's presence filling the tabernacle and guiding them to the Promised Land (Ex. 40).

Theme: This text is a case study in idolatry, namely its causes and consequences. Notice the severe reaction that Moses and God have against this sin. First, God declares that if He were to remain with this sinful people, He would soon destroy them all¹. Moses then pleads with God not to burn with anger, but when he himself sees the sin, he breaks the 10 commandments. Next, Moses melts the gold from the calf, puts it in water, and makes the people drink it. These are signs that the covenant is broken and the people will have to accept the consequences of their actions. Finally, Moses calls those who are on the Lord's side to pick up swords and kill thousands of their own brothers and sisters (possible background for Luke 16?). Finally, Moses begs to God for mercy and offers himself as a sacrifice. God rejects Moses' request and sends a plague on some of the people. God and Moses act in accordance with the covenant to show the severity of this sin. The goal of this strong reaction is to eradicate such awful activity among this new people in the land that would become their own nation.

So what caused the Israelites to make such a poor decision? In verse 32:1, the precipitating motivation is that they had not heard from God or His chosen spokesman for days. It seems their anxiousness, alongside God's perceived silence, led them astray. Remember that in the wilderness, obtaining food and water and maintaining the safety of the nation were precarious endeavors (see chaps. 15-18) which were not possible without God's intervention. Despite God's recent and miraculous interventions on their behalf, the Israelites felt they needed something to lead them and guide them during this uncertain time. Their 400-year-old habits from living in Egypt were not dying easily or quickly. Though we can relate to the reasons prompting their behavior, this text is clear about the utter stupidity and injustice of idolatry in the presence of a Holy God.

Aim: To keep our community devoted to God alone. During times of uncertainty or of waiting on God, help each other remember what God has done for us. Do not allow our community to rest or seek guidance in anything or anyone other than our Savior and Redeemer.

¹ As mentioned in the context, the stipulations of the covenant clearly demand this justice. Furthermore, an Ancient Near Easterner who read this text would have expected God to protect His honor and holiness by destroying the people. The surprise in this text in the eyes of an Ancient reader would have been in finding out that this God does not destroy this people, but rather shows mercy. This would have been perceived as weakness, except that God has already shown His supreme power against all other contending gods in the Exodus story (plagues, Passover, Red Sea).

Prayer: -Identify and confess the things that pull your devotion away from God.
-Pray that God would remove those idols from your life, though it may be quite painful.
-Use Isaiah 40:9-31 as a prayer to express the greatness of God (Is. 40-48 contains many passages about the folly of idolatry that may be useful).

Study Questions:

What drove the people to construct the idol and worship in ways that were not pleasing to God?
Verse 1- impatience in the face of silence from God, Verse 6- old habits left over from Egypt.

What are some things that cause people to look elsewhere, away from God, for comfort and salvation?

Why was this sin such a terrible affront to God (verse 31 “great sin”)?

Israelites were just given the 10 commandments days earlier

Worshipped in Egyptian style, and God already proved their gods were not gods at all during the Exodus

Vs. 25 the people became a laughing stock

God is dishonored by their behavior, thus they were not fulfilling their role as priests for God

Thought they deserved to be wiped out completely, why does God keep Israel alive?

Verse 13, Moses puts the Covenant promise to Abraham in front of God

In verse 32, Moses offers to be an atonement for the Israelites’ sin. Why does God reject Moses’ atonement?

There are so many ways that Moses is a “type” of Christ. Moses is the law-giver, priest, prophet, intercessor, judge, shepherd, and redeemer of Israel. However, Moses is not the perfect lamb that can atone for our sins. Only Jesus, the sinless one, who is both God and man, can do this!

What did this sin indicate about the Israelites’ devotion to God?

This betrays a temporary and shallow trust in God’s promises and a disregard for His commands, among other things which constitute the type of spiritual dislocation that leads to idolatry.

What do you learn about the consequences of idolatry in this passage?

Defames God, causes division, causes people not to be firm, deserving penalty of death.

Idolatry is something that everyone, even religious people, falls into. What things draw worship and devotion away from God in the American church?

What do you wish the Israelites would have done differently in this story?

How can we guard each other from falling into similar sins?

Does it seem like God is silent in some areas of your life?

How is that affecting your worship and devotion?