

“Exodus”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 5

“Exodus 32:15-35”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

Often it is the case that we as human beings fail to understand the magnitude of what it means to break covenant with our creator. The story of the Golden Calf, as we have come to know it, teaches us much about the enormity of the problem created when human beings do breach covenant with God. This is important for us to understand so that we can begin to comprehend the colossal scale of the love expressed by God in continuing to pursue relationship with us after breaching covenant with Him. This section begins with Moses moving from his conversation, with *YHWH*, of forty days on the mountain and proceeding to go down toward the encampment. The conversation that he leaves behind was where we were informed that Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites because of their idolatry. Moses took on the role of mediator, thus saving the people. This account is remarkable for several reasons. One of the reasons is that Moses pleads for the people without being an actual witness to their sin, and two God listens to Moses and actually agrees to spare the people.

As we begin this account, Moses carries two remarkable tablets of the covenant: tablets that were the work of God, with

the writing of God, engraved by God Himself. These tablets are something incredibly precious. God took the time, and the care, to write on these tablets. Ramban suggests that the description of the tablets here serves to “...point up the strikingly audacious nature of Moses’ action in smashing the precious objects.”¹ This smashing of the tablets comes after the buildup in the narrative with the rather detailed account of Moses’ descent, carrying the engraved tablets, and then the account of meeting Joshua as he moved toward the camp.

We are told (verse 17) that Joshua hears noise in the camp, noise that he thinks sounds like the sounds of war in the camp. Moses (verse 18) quickly identifies the noise not as the sound of war, but as the sound of “revelers” (אָנָה - *anah* - singing, or chanting).² As Moses nears the camp he actually sees what the people are doing with the “calf” and their “dancing.” It is sometimes easy for us to reason things out in abstract terms, but when we come face to face with the reality of a situation the impact is often overwhelming to our senses and can elicit strong

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 206.

² Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in The Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 568.

emotional responses on our part. This is likely what we have here as Moses sees the reality of the apostasy of Israel.

Moses had earlier expressed that God had a “fierce wrath”³ (Hebrew - *חַר־אֵפֶקָה* - *charor afeka* - “the anger of your wrath” Greek - *τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ θυμοῦ* - *tes orges tou thomou*) with regard to the sin of Israel. This is very interesting because at 32:19 (Hebrew - *וַיַּחַר אֱלֹהִים* - *vaychar af* Greek - *ὀργισθεὶς θυμῷ* - *orgistheis thumo*) we have similar wording describing the response of Moses to actually seeing the golden calf and the “dancing” of the people. It is interesting that the first reaction of Moses, like the first reaction of *YHWH*, was one of burning wrath (verse 19; cf. verse 10). This viewing of the actual acts of his people, by Moses, elicits a response that mirrors that which God had earlier.

Can you imagine what Moses must have been feeling as he saw these people he had been pleading for acting in a way that is so powerfully contrary to how people of God should be acting? There are many causes of anger. Anger is a natural response to perceived threats.⁴ Everything Moses had hoped for, longed for,

³ Exodus 32:13

⁴ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/anger-management/art-20048149>

and dreamt could happen is now in danger because of the rash and seemingly irrational behavior of the people. How often have we seen this same type of scenario repeated among people. Moses has a dilemma, he has in his hands the actual words of God written in stone: on the other hand he has just encountered people that are unworthy of receiving these words. Moses resolves his dilemma, and the contradiction, by smashing the tablets in the sight of the people. This is perhaps something intended to shock the people into a recognition of the enormity of their sin.⁵ In a fit of anger, Moses threw the tablets and broke them (32:19). He smashes not only the tablets, but demonstrates for the people, in a very visible way, that the actions of the people have shattered the covenant with *YHWH*.

This is not the final act of the anger of Moses. He then takes the calf and burns it with fire, grinds it to powder, scatters it on the water and makes the Israelites drink the water. The feature of forcing the people to drink this contaminated water is a further sign of the total destruction of the cursed image which Israel had

⁵ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah publications Ltd., 2014), p. 497.

worshipped and of the enormity of their transgression.⁶ There is a lot of speculation as to exactly how this act was accomplished among commentators, but this is not a concern for the text here. The focus here is upon the fact that the image is completely destroyed and a part of that destruction is accomplished by the imbibing of it by the people. They are made to consume the object of their transgression.

After doing these things, Moses now turns his attention to Aaron (32:21). Moses uses the phrase that is translated as a “great sin” (חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה - *cha'aatah gedolah*) which is a legal term that is found in documents from Ugarit and in Egyptian marriage contracts, and it is always used as a reference to **adultery**. This same usage is to be found in Abimelech’s reproof of Abraham in Genesis 20:9,⁷ and in Genesis 39:9⁸ there is also very similar wording. There are then three other occurrences of this phrase

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 569.

⁷ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, “What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt ((חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה - *cha'aatah gedolah*)) on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done.” NRSV

⁸ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” NRSV.

“the great sin”⁹ in the Bible, with all of the references being to idolatry.¹⁰

Moses challenges Aaron’s role in this “great sin.” The response of Aaron to Moses (32:22) demonstrates his recognition of the harsh response of “hot anger” (Hebrew **יָחַר אַף** - *yichar af* - Greek **ὀργίζου** - *orgidzou* - “be angry” not hot anger) from Moses. The response of Moses is an extremely harsh response.¹¹ Aaron addresses Moses as “my lord,” in order to demonstrate a deference to the authority of Moses, which is an indication that he fully understands the great rage. Aaron then goes on to try and deflect guilt by telling Moses that the people are continually bent on “evil” (**רָע** - *ra* - here this word indicates that they were bent on ethical evil). Aaron tries to excuse himself by seeking to pass blame onto the people. In doing so Aaron repeats the words of the people, but abbreviates his own response to the people’s demand and at the same time glosses over his own involvement in the actual fashioning of the calf-image.¹²

⁹ Exodus 32:30, 31; 2 Kings 17:21.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 208.

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 208.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 208.

Aaron then goes on to try and diminish his role in making the idol by indicating that all he did was throw the gold from the people into the fire and “...out came this calf.” He indicates that all on its own it just pops out of the fire. In other words, Aaron is saying that he did not intend to fashion this calf, but it just emerged from the fire as if by magic (32:24).¹³ Moses is making no beneficial progress with the ridiculous efforts on the part of Aaron to deflect blame from himself. At 32:25, it is clear from the response of Moses that he is not buying any of the absurd statements coming from Aaron. Aaron, as leader, is still deemed to bear a leader’s responsibility for the wild behavior of the people.

There is here, in verse 25, a reference that makes it clear once again that there is a concern with what the enemies of Israel thought about what is going on between God and Israel. The word used here to describe the response of the enemies of Israel (שִׁמְצָה - *shimtsah*) can be translated as something along the lines of “derisive whispering.” Once again we find concern in the text expressed about people other than the people of Israel. The people were not making a very splendid example of being the

¹³ U. Cassuto, translated from Hebrew by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), p. 420.

chosen people of God, those that were to project the greatness and power of God into the world. In their moral failure they were not only shaming themselves, they were also bringing derision upon the name of *YHWH*. This is the way of idolatry, it is a “great sin” that brings shame not only on people supposed to bear the name of God, but upon their true God as well.

It is now down to Moses to respond to the chaos and mayhem created by Aaron’s poor leadership of the people. Moses (32:26) makes a stand in the gate of the camp and calls for those who are on *YHWH*’s side to come to him. Those who are his fellow tribesman are prepared to answer the call of Moses: the sons of Levi gathered around him. Moses then makes a proclamation in the name of *YHWH*, the God of Israel. We have been given no indication of these words previously being given to Moses from *YHWH*, but Moses expresses this as God’s will using prophetic phraseology.¹⁴ The solemn formula used here is used to signify that the assignment given to the Levites is extraordinary in its nature. It means that the instructions from Moses are beyond the

¹⁴ U. Cassuto, translated from Hebrew by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 421.

purview of any human beings to impose based on their own authority.¹⁵ These instructions come from God.

The command that Moses gives to the Levites is to go and, “Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.” The Levites are called to be absolutely impartial in their execution of the orders from Moses.¹⁶ The Levites fulfilled the orders (32:28) and executed “... about three thousand of the people ...” In performing this act of defending the holiness of *YHWH* Moses indicates that the Levites have now “ordained” or “consecrated” themselves (32:29) “to” *YHWH*. This action of the Levites brings forgiveness closer for the people since suffering purges sin, and death even more so, according to Cassuto.¹⁷

Other things are also changed for the people of Israel by the act of the Levites. “Originally, the firstborn sons were to have been the priests of the Jewish nation, who would serve in the

¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 209.

¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 209.

¹⁷ U. Cassuto, translated from Hebrew by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 422. Leviticus 8:18-35 the account of the consecrations of priests.

Tabernacle and in the Temple and be the spiritual leaders.”¹⁸

When *YHWH* spared the Jewish firstborn during the Plague of the Firstborn in Egypt, He “acquired” them and designated them as His special servants. In the description of the induction of the Levites as they began their new role (Numbers 8:16–18), *YHWH* tells Moses:¹⁹ “They are given over to me from the Israelites in place of all the newborn, the oldest of all the Israelites. I take them for myself. ¹⁷ Every oldest male among the Israelites is mine, whether human, or animal. When I killed all the oldest males in the land of Egypt, I dedicated them to myself. ¹⁸ I have taken the Levites in place of all the oldest among the Israelites.”²⁰

The choosing of the tribe of Levi for service to *YHWH* was said to have “brought a blessing” upon them. The zeal and militaristic nature of the tribe of Levi is well known from their past history. In Genesis 34, Levi along with Simeon, killed Hamor and Shechem in retaliation for the rape of their sister Dinah. The second such account, of the military nature of Levi, is found in the

¹⁸ Rochel Chein, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/691328/jewish/Why-were-the-Levites-chosen-to-be-Gds-special-ministers.htm.

¹⁹ Rochel Chein, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/691328/jewish/Why-were-the-Levites-chosen-to-be-Gds-special-ministers.htm.

²⁰ CEB.

bleeding of Jacob at Genesis 49:5. Finally, there is this account in Exodus 32. There are also a number of indications of the militaristic nature of Levi found in the writings of the intertestamental period literature as well.²¹ The warlike nature of the Levites has often posed problems for scholars as they attempt to relate the warlike nature of Levi to the “assumed irenic priests, the Levites.” The explanation for this warlike nature has been explained as being in the defense of *YHWH* and His righteousness.²²

At 32:30, Moses turns his attention to the people: he speaks to them of the “great sin” (חַטָּאָה גְדוֹלָה - *cha'aatah gedolah*) committed by them. As is so often the case with human beings, they fail to recognize that things are far worse than they actually realize, or comprehend. Moses demonstrates once again his tremendous character and “love” for his people by volunteering to go and face *YHWH* in order to try and make atonement (אַכַּפֶּרֶה - *acapperah*) on their behalf. This word for “atonement, can have the meaning of to “cover over, to pacify, or to make propitiation.”

²¹ *Testament of Levi* 5:2-3; *Testament of Simeon* 5:4-6; *Jubilees* 30:18.

²² John R. Spencer, “Levi, in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 4 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1992), p. 294.

What possibly could Moses offer to God in order to atone for the sin, to cover over it? How does one repair a breach of loyalty?

What can be done in order to restore a relationship in such circumstances?

At 32:31, Moses returns to *YHWH* and confesses to Him the sin of the people and once again there is the phrase “gods” of gold.” The usage of the plural Hebrew word for “gods” is once again confusing here. I can only offer a possibility for why the plural is used here. No one knows for sure, but certainly by the time the Greek Old Translation of the Torah was made a plural form was used in the Greek text (*θεοὺς* - *theous*) in order to differentiate the designation given to the idol from the designation given to *YHWH*. It is perhaps the case that there was a reticence on the part of the translators to seeing the word that was used for the one true God as being used in reference to “an” idol. It is perhaps the case that the earlier writer did not hold the same understanding, or sense of propriety as did those that came later (by the time the Old Greek translation was done). The earlier writer simply used the word that he knew as a reference to a god, any god. It would then be the case that he did not distinguish the

meanings of the words in the way that those who followed did by translating the words as a plural. If this, or something like this, is the case then the confusion of the plurals falls away.

At 32:32 Moses makes his actual appeal to *YHWH* for forgiveness of the people. Moses demonstrates a tremendous sense of selflessness in his plea. He offers to have his own name blotted out of the “book that you have written.” This request of Moses reflects a well-rooted and widespread Near Eastern belief in the existence of heavenly “books.” In the Hebrew Bible three types of these books are differentiated: There is the book of life, mentioned in Psalm 69:28,²³ in which it is thought that God inscribed the names of the living. Then there is the book of divine decrees in which is written the destinies of men and women and of peoples.²⁴ Lastly, there is the book of remembrance in Malachi

²³ **Let them be wiped out of the scroll of life! Let them not be recorded along with the righteous!** CEB.

²⁴ Ezekiel 2:9-10 **Then I looked, and there in a hand stretched out to me was a scroll.** ¹⁰ **He spread it open in front of me, and it was filled with writing on both sides, songs of mourning, lamentation, and doom.** CEB. Zechariah 5:1-4 **I looked up again and saw a flying scroll.** ² **And he said to me, “What do you see?” I said, “I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.”** ³ **He said to me, “This is the curse going out across all the land. Anyone stealing will be purged according to what’s on one side of the scroll, and anyone swearing lies will be purged according to what’s on the other side.** ⁴ **I sent it out, says the LORD of heavenly forces. It will come to the house of the thief and the one swearing lies in my name. It will lodge in their house and destroy the wood and stones of that house.”** CEB. Psalm 40:7 **So I said, “Here I come! I’m inscribed in the written scroll.** CEB. Psalm 139:16 **Your eyes saw my embryo, and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any one of them had yet happened.** CEB.

3:16²⁵ in which the deeds of human beings both good and evil are recorded. In the request that Moses makes here, what he is asking of God is to take his life if Israel is not forgiven.²⁶

At 32:33 *YHWH* responds to the appeal of Moses by indicating that He will blot out of his book “whoever has sinned.” This indicates that there must be a level of individual accountability. There is also an aspect of collective responsibility borne by the people as a whole. The divine promises of securing national territory for the people are considered to be immutable, but total absolution for the “great sin” of the worshipping the calf is not given here. The sentence that God gives to the people is a suspended sentence, the people are placed on a kind of probation for their sin at this point.²⁷

At 32:34, Moses is told to lead the people to the place already made known to Moses. God sent His angel in front of the people. The direct presence of God appears to have been withdrawn from the people at this point. God will not deal with

²⁵ **Then those revering the LORD, each and every one, spoke among themselves. The LORD paid attention and listened to them. Then a scroll of remembrance was written before the LORD about those revering the LORD, the ones meditating on his name.** CEB.

²⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, pp. 209-210.

²⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 210.

the people as directly as had been their hope. There will not now be direct relationship with *YHWH* and the people. At 32:35 *YHWH* sends a plague on the people. The word used here for “plague” (יִגְגֹּף - *yiggof*) shares the same root as one of the words for the plagues that *YHWH* sent upon Egypt. There is a consequence to sin, and at times even when there is forgiveness there are still consequences that must come. In this instance, God does not fully relieve the people of the consequences for their “great sin.” Despite this fact, there is still mercy of tremendous proportions given in the very limited response of *YHWH*: He does not utterly destroy them. In the following section God will reiterate His promise of giving the people the land promised to the patriarchs.

As human beings we have the extreme tendency to undervalue the cost of grace, especially when we are its recipients. Cheap grace is not what God delivers to us. We fail to understand the magnitude of sin’s consequences and this is exactly what we have in the giving of the life of Jesus to forgive our sins. Sin destroys relationship and only through the costly and self-giving act of forgiveness, the willing of another to absorb the pain and consequences generated by disbelief, distrust, and disloyalty can

relationship hope to continue. Even in this account in Exodus, there is a pointing forward to the great act of forgiveness that God would bring in order to save His people. God would take the suffering and pain of sin on Himself rather than destroy the guilty as their “great sin” warranted. The covenant had been breached even before the ink had dried, so to speak. In the midst of all of this God continues to pursue relationship. He seeks to help a people who are ignorant of the magnitude of His love and of the pain that this brings to the heart of a loving and caring God. God seeks genuine relationship, not just a facsimile, not merely a contract, or negotiated agreement, but real relationship.

This account challenges us to realize the tremendous magnitude of the consequences of sin. There is no cheap, or easy remedy. In the midst of his pain and anger God still seeks the redemption of those who are lost. He seeks to restore relationship and seeks to generate true loyalty in His children. God longs for hearts devoted to Him as the good creator and sovereign of the universe. God seeks our understanding of the magnitude of His love and the passionate nature that it takes. We all know that those who are closest to us have the ability to hurt us the most.

God makes Himself vulnerable to us by drawing us close to His heart.

Synopsis

This account can help us to recognize the fact that sin (breach of the covenant) is far more serious than we often realize. In this account, we actually get to see the reaction of Moses to actually seeing what Israel is doing in the incident with the golden calf. In the previous section he had pleaded with *YHWH* not to destroy the people and he tried to assuage the wrath of God. In this account, seeing the actual sin of the people causes wrath to rise in Moses himself and he first breaks the tablets, confronts Aaron, then calls, what turns out to be the Levites, to put a stop to the revelry.

In answering the call of Moses, the Levites are awarded the honor of serving as protectors and servants in service of God's tabernacle in replacement of the firstborn of Israel. After this Moses will once again agree to go and intercede for the people with God. He shows his great love and care for the people even in the midst of their sin by trying to persuade God to take his life if He is not going to forgive the people. Even this fails to fully persuade God to remove all consequences of their sins. God tells Moses that the one who sins against Him will lose his life. Yet, God

defers their punishment. It appears also, as part of the punishment, or perhaps as an act of mercy, God distances Himself from the people by sending his angel to go in front of the people rather than for He Himself to be in their midst. In addition, God sends a plague upon the people, because of the calf that they had made.

This account is challenging in many ways, but I believe it is meant to aide us in understanding the extremely serious nature of sin and the extreme cost of grace.

Questions

1. How precious do you think it would be to have tablets written by the hand of God Himself?
2. Why do you think it is not the case that we have documents written by the hand of God Himself today?
3. What do you think would happen if people were to find the ark of the covenant today?
4. Why do you think Joshua assumed that the sound he heard in the camp was the sound of war?
5. Why do you think Moses was so angry when he saw the calf and the dancing of the people?
6. Why do you think Moses broke the tablets?
7. Do you think Moses believes that the people of Israel deserve to have the tablets that God had written?
8. What purpose do you think is served by what Moses does with the calf that they had made?
9. How would you feel if you had been made to drink the water with the powdered calf spread over it?
10. How do you think Aaron felt about being confronted by Moses about making the calf of gold?
11. Why do you think Aaron tries to cast the blame onto the people? Do you think this response from Aaron is warranted, knowing the nature of the people?
12. What do you make of the account 32:24 of Aaron saying he threw the gold into the fire and “out came this calf?”

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13. Why do you think the statement regarding the derision of their enemies is important?
 14. What do you make of the response of Levi to the call of Moses?
 15. Why do you think Moses calls for the killing of “your brother, your friend, and your neighbor?”
 16. Do you think the killing of three thousand people is sufficient punishment for the sin of the people here? Why, or why not?
 17. Why do you think God rewards the Levites for killing the people?
 18. Why do you think Moses pleads for forgiveness for the people even after his orders brought death to thousands?
 19. Why do you think God refuses the request of Moses for forgiveness of the people?
 20. Do you think it is fair to hold the individual who sinned responsible for their own sin? Why, or why not?
 21. Why do you think God sends a plague on the people?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that committing sin has consequences and things are worse than people realize. Forgiveness is necessary in order for relationship to continue, but it is not cheap, or easy. It is important to know that forgiveness always has a cost for the one who gives it. For God to forgive His people carries an amazingly high price. God chose to pay this price through sacrificing Himself rather than exacting justice. Why do you think God is willing to sacrifice so much in order to bring forgiveness to people?

Where is God in these words?

In these words, if we will listen carefully and look closely, we can see some important things about the nature of God and the consequences of sin. Human beings have a huge tendency to trivialize the cost of forgiveness and the magnitude of the consequences of sin. God is in these words trying to teach people the truth of these realities. Why do you think it is important for God to teach these truths to people?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

If we truly begin to understand the magnitude of sin and the tremendous cost of forgiveness then we can begin more fully to understand the magnitude of the love of God and the tremendous cost that He was willing to pay to restore relationship with human beings. This should change the way we see others who we have sinned against and those who have forgiven us for sinning against them. When is a time that you have forgiven someone? How did it feel to forgive them?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to understand more fully His nature and the magnitude of His love. I believe that this account challenges us to be faithful to God, loyal to Him, and to avoid idolatry. The word of God is also warning us to avoid thinking that grace is cheap and that forgiveness is easy. Having these understandings should challenge us to avoid sin and idolatry if we have a healthy understanding of God. When is it the hardest for you to forgive someone else?