

Rescued to Know Him: We Have a Problem (Part 2)

Exodus 32:1 – 33:6

The world is filled with evidence that people are capable of some amazing things. The summer Olympics took place a couple of months ago and I'm always blown away by the work and commitment and just sheer physical talent that those athletes show. And sports are just one area where humans demonstrate how we are fearfully and wonderfully made to excel. From medicine to music to technological advancements to art and literature, people are awesome.

And yet, there's another side to human beings. Drive for 5 minutes on I75 and you will see how terrible people can be to one another. We are self-centered, arrogant, violent, power hungry, and often out to exploit those who are weak and in need. It's always fascinating to watch people try to make sense of the two sides of humans. How can a creature capable of creating symphonies and life saving medical procedures also be such jerks to one another? There's clearly something causing the dark side of humanity and nearly everyone has some opinion about what it might be.

We are seeing this dark side of humanity put on full display here in Exodus 32 and this helps us to understand the real reason why such amazing creatures can turn out so bad. The single word at the root is obviously sin, but specifically the posture of the human heart that wants what it wants and is willing to craft idols to replace the Creator to try and get what we want. Understanding the depths of the human problem prepares us to make sense of God's revelation of Himself in Exodus 34:6-7. Let me remind you of what we find there. The big question that comes from God's description of Himself is how we understand the relationship between mercy and justice. God shows mercy but doesn't clear the guilty.

This whole golden calf incident is the context in which those words come to Moses. So, we begin by studying Israel's sin and idolatry in 32:1 – 33:6 and there we are seeing **5 Ways the Problem of Sin Disrupts and Destroys.**

1. We Seek Security and Satisfaction on Our Terms and Not God's (32:1-6)

While Moses is up on Mt. Sinai receiving God's instructions regarding the tabernacle and priesthood, the Israelites start to panic that maybe Moses won't return and they won't be able to leave the wilderness and make it to the

Promised Land. So, they seek security and well-being, not in trusting God, but in an idol they create. They exchange the glory and majesty of God for a dead idol and trust that idol for safety and guidance. It's pure insanity. And they do this because of their corrupted hearts.

2. We Live from Corrupted Hearts (32:7-10)

In verse 7 the scene shifts to the top of Mt. Sinai where God is meeting with Moses. He explains to Moses what is happening and gives His assessment of Israel. God describes Israel in a number of ways in this passage. Look at verses 7, 8, and 9. They are corrupted and acting in ways that lead to further corruption. They are rebellious and disobedient, and they are stiff-necked and stubborn. All of this leads to God's jealous anger in verse 10. Now, Moses will respond to God's wrath and intercede for Israel and his intercession will highlight another way that sin disrupts and destroys.

3. We Ignore God's Glory (32:11-14)

Look at verse 11 as Moses responds to God. Now, Moses is not asking God to list the reasons for why He's angry with Israel. Moses knows why as God has just told him. It's more of a rhetorical question and he's trying to highlight God's relationship to Israel as their redeemer and one of God's purposes for rescuing Israel from Egypt. Notice what he says at the end of verse 11.

This takes us back to God's explanation of why the plagues to bring Israel out of Egypt in Exodus 9:16. God wanted to put His glory and power on display so that the Egyptians and the other nations would know He is the one true God. Look at how Moses explains this in 32:12. Moses is concerned with God's glory and clearly Israel was not. If God destroys the Israelites in the wilderness, Moses argues that the Egyptians will perceive God as powerful and evil, not powerful and good. So Moses requests that God turn from His anger and remember the covenant He made with the patriarchs. Look at verse 13.

At least part of the covenant with the patriarchs was that God would bless their descendants so that they would be a blessing to the world as they represented God. Israel had forgotten this purpose. They had ignored what God said to them in Exodus 19:4-6.

They had forgotten that they are His people and He had delivered them to put His glory on display. And, they had neglected the fact that Israel's highest good was to be found in God and not in self and having their needs met.

Think about this for you and I. We are created as image bearers. In other words, we exist to represent God and reflect His character. We find our purpose and fulfillment in this role. We exist to make the original look good. The first question of the old Westminster Catechism puts it like this: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

I read a story a few years ago about a 17-year-old in Britain who went blind from only eating pringles chips, white bread, and French fries for 10 years. Your body is designed to work in a certain way and when you ignore that design, it leads to all sorts of problems. Humans are designed to function spiritually, emotionally, and relationally by living to glorify God and find our satisfaction and enjoyment in Him. To attempt to replace Him with created things is to treat your soul like that British kid treated His body.

Now, amazingly enough, even after Israel had traded God's glory for an idol, God responded to Moses by agreeing not to completely destroy the people. Look at verse 14. But this doesn't mean there is forgiveness and this doesn't mean there will be no consequences. And that brings us to our next way sin disrupts and destroys.

4. We Experience Judgment and Consequences (32:15-35)

At this point in the story the scene changes again and Moses begins to head down the mountain to see for Himself what God has told him about. He takes the two tablets with him and these are significant tablets. Look at verses 15-16. He emphasizes over and over again that God had written on these, front and back, Himself. Why? These tablets are the covenant. They are the covenant document, showing the agreement between God and Israel. They are called the "tablets of the testimony". Keep that in mind as you see what happens in a second.

As Moses descends the mountain he meets up with Joshua, who was waiting for him. Notice what Joshua says in verse 17. Quite a ruckus happening. Moses clarifies in verse 18 that it's actually the sound of a party and not war. That must have been some out of control party. Now verse 19.

Moses is rightly angry, and it would have been wrong for him to treat Israel's sin casually. Don't picture him smashing the tablets here as out of control rage. He does this when he comes near the camp and gets to the foot of the mountain, where all the Israelites were gathered. And he does this because the tablets represented the covenant with God and this is a symbolic act showing the covenant has been broken. And with a broken covenant comes consequences. Look at verse 20.

The goal here is to desecrate this idol and show it to be worthless. It's easy to get a funny picture of Moses lining the people up and forcing a cup of water to their lips but what he does is throw this into the water supply, so they had to drink it. One author said the goal of this was for the idol to end up consumed by the people and eventually exiting the people to show exactly what the people should think of any false gods.

Now Moses goes after Aaron, his brother, and the man who God had designated as high priest. Look at verses 21-24. Notice a couple of things in this response. Aaron shifts blame to the people and even to Moses for being gone so long. It's very similar to what Adam and Eve do after they sin in the garden. And then Aaron's suggestion that the calf sort of magically arose out of the fire is just stupid and ridiculous. Sin really does make us say and do stupid things.

I can imagine that during this conversation the unruly and out of control party is taking place around them and Moses begins to take notice. Look at verse 25. To break loose simply means they were out of control. It's a mob. This phrase, "to the derision of their enemies" could mean that any nations nearby would now view Israel as susceptible to attack or that their enemies would mock them for their craziness. Either way it's not good and shows just how far from glorifying God they had come. So, Moses has to deal with their sin or it will overwhelm the entire nation.

Look at verses 26-29. Now, this is not a random attack where the Levites went through the camp and just starting swinging swords. Most likely they went through the camp and asked people if they were repentant for what they had done or if they were committed to continuing to pursue idol worship and revelry. The purpose here is to eliminate those who had provoked the nation to forsake God and who would do so again.

The goal here is to restrain the evil and highlight God's justice. He will not simply sweep the breaking of the covenant under the rug, shrug his shoulders and let this go. And this is where we begin to see the tension playing out from Exodus 34:6-7, the tension between justice and mercy. In verse 14 we saw God respond to Moses's request and relent from destroying Israel. But here we see God follow through in judgment with consequences for the wrong done. And we see this justice highlighted further in verses 30-35.

Look at verse 30. Moses recognizes that atonement must be made if forgiveness will happen. There must be a price paid that brings together two parties at odds. Peace must be made so reconciliation can happen. Notice how Moses attempts to do this in verses 31-32. Essentially Moses offers himself as an atoning sacrifice for Israel. But notice how God responds in verse 33.

God is quite clear that anyone who sins will be blotted out of the book of life and this means that forgiveness and atonement are required to cause one's name to be written in that book and to receive life. Also notice that God flat out refuses Moses's offer of himself as a sacrifice for Israel. Moses is a sinner too. He needs atonement himself and he cannot stand in the gap for Israel. Here we have a clear indication that full forgiveness awaits one greater than Moses.

So, God tells Moses to lead Israel to the Promised Land, and clearly He won't destroy them, but the covenant has not been mended. Consequences for sin continue to unfold. Look at verse 35. Now, this brings us to our last way sin disrupts and destroys and this is the ultimate consequence for wrong.

5. We are Exiled from God's Presence (33:1-6)

Look what God says to Israel in verses 1-3. God will still be faithful to His promises to the Patriarchs to give the people the land, but He will not go up among them. Notice the difference in language here from 32:34 where the angel will go before you and the language here where God will not go "among you."

The reason for this is both judgment and mercy. The Israelites are stubborn and sinful and God's holiness cannot allow sin into His presence. His holiness would consume them. Look at verses 4-6. The people know what a big deal this is.

And so, this section puts all the cards on the table. What have we learned? God is merciful in that He doesn't directly destroy Israel for breaking the covenant. He's

gracious in that He responds to His chosen mediator Moses and his intercession for the people. We've also learned that sin brings judgment and consequences. Sin cannot be treated casually and the consequences often go far beyond what we imagine they will. We've seen that God is a God of wrath and justice. He will not simply wipe away sin. Forgiveness requires atonement and even someone of the stature of Moses, a friend of God, cannot provide the full atonement needed for Israel. Finally, we've seen that sin exiles us from the presence of God. This is both a judgment and a mercy because God's absolute holiness would consume any human with sin.

We've learned all these truths about God through this passage, but how do they all fit together? That's the question we will explore more as continue in this section of Exodus in the coming weeks. Let's pray.