

Exodus 32:7-14

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we came to a part in Exodus that should feel to all of us like the end of the road – even the end of the world. The golden calf is the reversal and the undoing of the last thirty-one chapters in Exodus – of the **tabernacle**, of the **covenant**, and even of Israel’s **redemption** from Egypt. If the last thirty-one chapters have been all about a new creation, then chapter thirty-two is the equivalent of the **fall** all over again. So, what *now*?

Up at the top of the mountain, God knows what’s been happening at the bottom; but, of course, Moses doesn’t know anything – **not until God tells him**.

I. Exodus 32:7–8 — And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”

You can already “hear” the “tone of voice.” The Lord is wrathful; His anger is burning. “Go down!” And, then, three rapid fire accusations: They have **corrupted** themselves... they have turned aside **quickly**... They have made for themselves a **golden calf**...” And then God recites, we can imagine with rising fury, every damning detail: They have **worshiped** it and **sacrificed** to it and **said**, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

We’ve heard a lot recently about the “wrath of Harvey” and the “wrath of Irma.” With a hurricane, at least, you might be able to flee, or maybe seek shelter and *hope* to ride it out. But when it comes to the anger of God, there’s never any place to run to, and never any place to hide. We’ve seen the anger of the Lord before, in the Bible, but this is the first time that we’re seeing it “up close and personal,” and may God use this to teach us *wisdom*.

On the one hand, God’s anger is not like most of the anger that we experience. Most of the time, our anger is an involuntary reaction to something that happens around us. So, someone insults me and all of a sudden I’m angry, and that anger wells up in me as something almost outside of my control. But God’s anger is always completely “under His control.” Anger is not something that comes upon Him suddenly and without warning, but something that God is “feeling” all the time. Because there are always the wicked, therefore, God is *always* angry, and this constant, unceasing anger is just the expression of His constant unceasing holiness.

➤ Psalm 7:11 (NASB) — God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day.

Having said these things, we can’t think that God’s anger is ever just an auto-programmed response. It’s a *true* indignation, and a *true* fury and wrath, and a *true* anger. In this sense, we can say that our anger is something very much like His, because we’ve been made in His image. And this should make the anger *of God* all the more fearful to us. God’s anger is **unlike** ours because He’s angry all the time, and His anger is always the perfectly consistent expression

of His unchanging holiness. Combine this with the fact that God’s anger is also, **like** ours, a real and true anger – something that He personally “feels” and we have the “recipe” for an anger that we would be *fools* not to **tremble** at. This is the anger of **God**. And here in this passage, we’re seeing it for the very first time “up close and personal.” Again, may God use this, this morning, to teach us *wisdom*.

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, for **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.’” Those are devastating words. To this point in Exodus, God has always referred to the people of Israel as “**My** people.” (a full 17 times)

- Exodus 3:7 — Then the LORD said [to Moses], “I have surely seen the affliction of **my people** who are in Egypt...”
- Exodus 6:7 — I will take you to be **my people**, and I will be your God...

After hearing this language over and over again in Exodus, and after seeing *all* that God has already *done* in *taking* Israel to *be His* people, these are words that reverberate in the book of Exodus: “**Your** people, whom **you** brought...” You can see God distancing Himself from the people because what they’ve done is repulsive to Him. You can even hear Him disowning the people. (cf. Hos. 1:9) This isn’t just a matter of broken relationship. This is the fierce anger of God burning. This is the undoing of the last thirty-one chapters in Exodus.

And yet, there’s something still very curious here. *Why* does God bother telling Moses anything at all? Why doesn’t God just do whatever it is He’s going to do, and be done with it? Well, the reality is that the people of Israel **are** Moses’ people (cf. Deut. 5:24-29), and Moses **is** the man who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. The Lord said to Moses back in chapter three:

- Exodus 3:10 — Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.

So even as the words “your people, whom you brought” are the expression of God’s burning anger, they would still be **true** words – even if God were **not** angry. With this in mind, we can ask again: Why should God bother to say anything at all to **Moses** – the leader and the prophet that He appointed for the people? In fact, God still isn’t finished. He has *more* to say to Moses in verses 9 and 10.

II. Exodus 32:9–10 — And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

This is not an idle or an empty threat. It’s 100% **real**. It’s real **because** God is angry, and His anger is **real**. And if that anger is left to go on burning, unabated, it simply **has** to result in Israel’s complete annihilation. This is what **will** happen, and is even now on the very verge of happening.

But then we ask again, why is God bothering to tell all this to Moses? **Why** does God say to **Moses**: “**let me alone**, that my wrath may burn hot against them...”? There’s a very clear implication in these words. What happens if Moses does *not* “leave God alone”?

This whole thing is wrapped up with Moses, because the flip side of destroying Israel is that God will then replace this people by making a great nation of Moses. Five hundred fifty years earlier, God said to Abram:

➤ Genesis 12:2 (cf. 46:2-4) — I will make of you a great nation.

Period. But to Moses God says: “Let me alone... in order that I may make a great nation of you.” Did you see the big difference? To Abram, God makes a **promise**. To Moses, God seems to be making a **proposal**. But **why propose** anything at all? Why not just destroy the people, and start over with Moses, and be done with it?

It’s right at this point that we need to be asking a really difficult, but important question: If God starts over with Moses, can this still be counted as the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob? The answer would appear to be “no.” (cf. Gen. 15:13-16; Exod. 6:6-8) Listen to what Jacob says to his son, Joseph, in Genesis 48:

➤ Genesis 48:3–5 — God Almighty... blessed me, and said to me, “Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.” And now your two sons... are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are.

Jacob clearly understands that the promise of God is to be fulfilled through *all* of his sons, and so, **by faith in God’s promise**, he even takes two of the sons of Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim), and adopts them as his own to be among the future tribes of Israel. We go on to read in verses 15-19:

➤ Genesis 48:15–19 — [Jacob] blessed Joseph and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked... bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him... And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”

Now Moses was not from the tribe of Ephraim *or* Manasseh, but from the tribe of Levi. To make Moses into a great nation would *not* seem to qualify as the fulfillment of God’s promise to Jacob. Before Jacob died, he said to Joseph:

- Genesis 48:21–22 — God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.

Why was Jacob so confident that God would bring Ephraim and Manasseh back to the land of their fathers – so confident that he even deeded over some of the land of Canaan to the descendants of Joseph? The answer is because of strong faith in God’s promise. So the writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 11:21 — **By faith** Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph.

In Genesis 49, we see Jacob blessing each one of his twelve sons “with the blessing suitable to him.” (Gen. 49:28) Almost all these blessings looked far into the future when his sons would have already become tribes living in the land of Canaan. Again, this was just the result of believing and trusting that God would be faithful to His promise. We might especially think of the blessing given to Judah:

- Genesis 49:10 — The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

It’s not through Moses that the Messiah is to come! And then listen to what Joseph says to his brothers before he dies:

- Genesis 50:24 — I am about to die, but God will visit **you** and bring you up out of this land **to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.**

Joseph is confident that *this* people, consisting of the *twelve* sons of *Israel* is to be the fulfillment of the nation that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And, therefore, it is *this* people that God will bring into the land of Canaan in fulfillment of His promises.

The whole history of everything we’ve read in the Bible from the first call of Abram in Genesis 12 until this very moment in Exodus 32 tells us that the promises of God can only be truly fulfilled in and through the twelve sons of Jacob – the twelve tribes of Israel. **AND YET(!!!)**, having said this, we know that the Lord’s threat here in Exodus 32 is no empty threat. This isn’t just a case of God blowing off steam. It never is. No, the danger is real. The anger of the Lord **is burning**, and the Israelites **are in its path** – it’s as simple as that. We can see that Moses very much understands the threat to be real because of how intensely and earnestly he prays. Verse 11:

III. Exodus 32:11 — But Moses implored the LORD his God...

Moses **isn’t** thinking to himself: “I know the Lord’s promises, I know the Lord isn’t really going to follow through on this, so I don’t need to do anything. I’ll just sit back and watch what happens.” Neither is Moses thinking to himself, “Well, I guess I’d better go through the motions of praying.” Moses knows that **if** he fails here, the people of Israel **are** finished. They **will** all be destroyed. And so he **refuses** to “let the Lord alone.”

If only the Israelites had known what was happening at this very moment at the top of the mountain, and how they were all, right then and there, just a hairsbreadth away from total annihilation. But they didn't know. They had no idea. Only Moses knew, and that's only because God has chosen to tell him. So, how will Moses pray? What could he say to turn God's wrath away?

IV. Exodus 32:11–13 — But Moses implored the LORD his God and said,

“O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?
Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’?
Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.
Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

Moses “reminds” the Lord that the people are His (“*your* people”). At the end of the day, this is the people of Moses only because they are first of all the Lord's people – the people whom *the Lord* brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. But certainly, God hasn't forgotten this? So why should this prayer change anything with God?

The next thing Moses does is “remind” the Lord of how things will look to the Egyptians if He destroys the Israelites now. They'll say that Israel's God purposefully brought them out into the desert in order to kill them. They'll think that Israel's God is like all the gods of the nations – fickle, and changeable, and not at all to be trusted. (cf. Exodus 7:5 (cf. 7:17; 8:10, 22; 14:4, 18) But, certainly, God doesn't need to be reminded of the dangers to His own reputation? So how can Moses think that this prayer will change anything with God?

Finally, Moses comes to his last – and His strongest – argument. Moses begs the Lord to remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, His servants, **to whom He swore by His own self**, and said to them, “I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.” But, certainly, God hasn't actually forgotten that He swore this oath? In fact, this seems to be the very thing that God *does* remember when He actually quotes to Moses the words of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “Now therefore let me alone... **in order that I may make a great nation of you.**” No, God hasn't forgotten His promise. Not at all. So, then, why should Moses think that this prayer will change anything with God? **Why** should we have any reason to hope that the last 31 chapters of Exodus have not all been for nothing?

Conclusion

Remember the question that we asked earlier. Why does God bother telling Moses what's happening at the bottom of the mountain? Why does God bother telling Moses what's about to

happen because of the fierceness of His burning anger? Why does God bother to say to Moses, “Let me alone, that My wrath may burn hot...”? Why not just go ahead and be done with it all?

Even in the midst of His very real wrath and fury, God Himself is **reminding** Moses of his role and calling as Israel’s covenant mediator. In fact, it was God Himself who had appointed Moses ahead of time *precisely* for just such a day and time as this.

Why does God tell Moses to “let Him alone”? Because of the fierceness of His burning anger. Again: Why does God tell Moses to “let Him alone”? Because He **wants Moses to know** what will happen *IF* he does not pray.

Why does God propose to make a great nation of Moses? Because of the fierceness of His burning anger. Again: Why does God propose to make a great nation of Moses? Because He **wants Moses to be reminded** of His sworn oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – an oath that’s about to be rendered null and void—**for real—if only(!!!)** Moses will let God alone.

You see, the wrath of God is real, and the threat is real, and yet there’s more, here, than *just* wrath. There’s also the secret working of God’s eternal purposes. I say the “secret workings” because there are things here on which we’re *fools* to speculate. There are things here that are too high and wonderful, and too deep and fathomless for us. And yet what we need to know for our own good and edification is laid out before us very clearly.

God swore an oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But that’s not all God did. He also appointed ahead of time all the necessary **means** for those promises to be fulfilled. And so we see that while the content of Moses’ prayer *is* important, what’s even more important is who Moses is. Moses is the man that **God** appointed ahead of time precisely **for** just such a day as this. Think of that! Before this day came and before the Israelites ever built the golden calf, God called and appointed Moses to be the covenant mediator – to be the man who would stand in the gap. Therefore, now that this day *has* come, what does God do **even as His anger is burning?** **Underneath** and **behind** it all, God Himself is reminding Moses of his role and **calling him to pray**. (cf. Amos 7:1-6)

The threat was real: “Moses, this is what *will* happen if you do not pray.” God’s anger was real: “Let me alone, that... I may consume them.” And yet, **so also(!)** are the unchanging, gracious and saving purposes of God. And it’s precisely these unchanging, eternal purposes that give Moses the **confidence** to entreat and to implore the Lord in prayer. Moses doesn’t say to himself: “I know the Lord’s promises, I know the Lord isn’t really going to follow through on this, so I don’t need to do anything. I’ll just sit back and watch what happens.” Can you see how ludicrous, and preposterous, and how devastating this **would** have been? Instead, Moses says: “I know the Lord’s promises; therefore, I can have the hope and confidence that God **will** spare His people **if** I entreat and implore Him *now* with all my heart. And, so, Moses prayed. And the Lord listened.

IV. Exodus 32:14 — And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

What a wonderful, awesome, mysterious miracle. God listens to the voice of a man, in order that His own eternal purpose, unconditionally decreed before the foundation of the world, should come to pass. God listened to the prayer of Moses, in order that His own eternal plan for the salvation of the world—for the salvation of you and me—should be fulfilled. What I'm saying is this: When God chose Israel before the foundation of the world, He also chose a mediator for just such a day as this. When God made all His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He also appointed ahead of time all the necessary means for those promises to be fulfilled.

And so we see that God's plan is the ultimate **cause** of all things, and this should be a constant, wonderful **comfort** to us. (cf. Prov. 16:1, 9, 33; 21:1; Mat. 10:29-30)

And yet far from cancelling out our own prayers, and labors, and wrestling, God's plan actually establishes these things and **calls** us to **engage** in these things – to pray, and to labor, and to wrestle every day *because* we know that God's saving purposes for us in Christ can never, ever be thwarted. This is what gives us the *confidence* to pray, and to labor, and to fight and wrestle. This is what gives us the *assurance* that our prayers and our labors and our striving and wrestling are not only never in vain, but even absolutely **necessary if** we would inherit eternal life. God hears our prayers and works through our prayers because these are the very things He has appointed ahead of time for the accomplishing of His own sovereign, and eternal, and saving purposes.

- Psalm 106:19–23 — They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore he said **he would** destroy them— **had not Moses**, his **chosen one**, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

The wrath of God is real. The warnings of God are real. So may these things teach us **wisdom**. Let us pray all the **more** earnestly, and strive all the **more** diligently, and wrestle all the **more** strenuously—*always knowing* that “it is God who works in [us], both to will and to work according to His good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:12-13)

And, now, in the midst of all this, we remember that there is one who's prayers *for us* are even infinitely more powerful and effective than Moses' ever were. All of our praying, and laboring, and wrestling is ultimately dependent on His faithful, unceasing prayers and intercessions for us. In the end, we'll be saved from the wrath of God only because God Himself has appointed a mediator who always lives and pleads for us.

- Romans 8:32–34 — He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

God's plan *cannot* be derailed. **So, then**, let us **pray**, and **work**, and **fight**, and **strive** until Jesus comes.