

## Exodus 32:15-29

### Introduction

As we begin this morning, we remember what happened last week. For their sin with the golden calf, the whole nation of Israel was about to be destroyed. The anger of the Lord was burning, and the people of Israel were directly in its path. And yet even as the Lord was about to destroy the Israelites, He was also calling Moses to pray – to pray earnestly that prayer apart from which there could be no salvation for Israel. The threat was real, because the anger of God was real. And, yet, so also was the unchanging gracious and saving purpose of God revealed in His sworn oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And, so, Moses prayed. And the Lord listened.

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

Thus fortified, and encouraged, and filled with hope, we pick up again with the events of the story in verse 15:

**I. Exodus 32:15–16** — Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

Why, all of a sudden, this lengthy description of the two tablets of the testimony? How does this fit in the story? Honestly, what we have here is the key to the whole thing – it’s the **key** to rightly understanding everything that comes next. So, we need to camp out here for just a minute.

We’re not just to envision Moses turning and going down from the mountain; we’re to envision him turning and going down from the mountain **with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand**. Back in Exodus 24:

- Exodus 24:12 — The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

And then, after forty days and forty nights on the mountain, we finally read at the end of chapter 31:

- Exodus 31:18 — And [the Lord] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

So now, all that remains is for Moses to bring the tablets down to the people and place them inside the Ark of the Covenant which is to be located at the very center and heart of the people of God – behind the veil, in the Most Holy Place. (cf. Exod. 25:16; 40:20) The Ten Words that God spoke out loud to the people from the top of Mount Sinai are now “*here*,” recorded on two stone tablets. And so what we have here in **physical form** is the sum and the substance of the whole

entire covenant – specifically, of God’s covenant **relationship** with the people that He has **loved** and **redeemed** out of the house of slavery and **called to Himself**. That’s what we have here in these two tablets of stone. We’re not meant to think of these as something impersonal, and burdensome, and cold. No. They’re a precious and infinitely wonderful gift from God in heaven. It’s not just law. It’s law as the sum and substance of covenant, and covenant relationship. Moses knows all this! And this is what he’s emphasizing when he says of the tablets that he was carrying down the mountain: [They were] tablets... written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.” As one commentator says: “These two tablets were the most valuable material thing on earth at that time.” (Stuart) Would you agree?

Summed up on these tablets is the whole message and goal of Exodus – a covenant relationship between God and the people that He has **loved** and **redeemed** and **called** to Himself. For a moment, then, maybe we forget what’s *still* happening at the bottom of the mountain. *Here* is the goodness of God, *and* also the authority of God. Here is the love of God, *and* His justice – His righteousness, *and* His mercy and grace. Here is all our obligation to love, and serve, and obey Him by faith. It’s only when we can **see** and **feel** these things clearly that we can truly grasp the things that happen next.

Back in Exodus 24, we learned that when Moses went up into the mountain he took Joshua with him part of the way. (cf. 24:13) Now Moses rejoins Joshua on his way down.

**II. Exodus 32:17–19** — When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

It’s one thing to hear what’s happening at the bottom of the mountain. It’s another thing to see. And now that Moses sees, it’s *his* anger that “burns hot.” We know just *how* hot his anger was burning in that he actually takes the two tablets of the testimony, throws them out of his hands, and breaks them at the foot of the mountain. If you really take the time to “see” what’s just happened, it’s a shockingly graphic picture. **How** angry would you have to be to do something like this? Seriously. *How* angry? Maybe it would be better to ask: With what **kind** of anger would you have to be burning *in order to do something like this*? Moses knows full well *what it is* that he carries in his hands. And yet this is, actually, precisely *why* he throws the tablets down the side of the mountain. The broken tablets are now the sign of a **broken** covenant.

Why does Moses’ anger burn? Because of the depth of his **love** and reverence for what he carried in his hands, and because of the corresponding depth of his **hatred** and abhorrence for the sin that breaks the covenant. That’s the only *kind* of anger that could burn that hot. That’s the only *kind* of anger that can explain how Moses could break into pieces something *so* precious as the two tablets which were the work of God, and whose writing was the writing of God.

Before we can ask any other question of any other verses in this chapter, we have to ask ourselves here: “Are we, at least at first, stunned and appalled by what Moses does?” And then,

“Have we ever known for ourselves what this kind of anger is?” Would *we* have been so angry as to throw the tablets crashing down the side of the mountain? Would we have been so angry as to do what Moses does next?

**III. Exodus 32:20** — He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

We definitely shouldn't be humored or amused. This isn't something for us to smile at. The point, here, is a total and complete annihilation. Eradication, extermination – pick your word. Moses isn't content to chop the idol into pieces or to melt it down. Moses takes every step physically possible to make sure that *these* materials with which *this* idol was made are for all practical purpose turned back into actual nothingness – unmade, annihilated, obliterated forever. So, whether the people of Israel were *compelled* to drink the contaminated water or they simply had no other option because this was their only water supply, the final fate of the burned and pulverized remains of this idol is to be passed through their digestive systems and then expelled as so much filth. Would *we* have been so thorough? Which is just to say: Would we have been *that* angry?

Why is Moses so violent? Why does he burn, and then pulverize, and then scatter, so the people will have to drink, and then digest and expel what's left of their idol? What can possibly explain an anger that burns *this* hot? Only the depth of his **love** and reverence for the law that *this idol* has broken (and which lies now shattered at the foot of the mountain); only the depth of his **love** and reverence for the God that *this idol* mocks and scorns. Anger that is righteous and holy is still anger; in fact, it burns the hottest precisely *because* it's righteous and holy. So we go on to read of Moses' words to Aaron in verses 21-24:

**IV. Exodus 32:21–24** — And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, ‘Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

Maybe we want to hear more of this exchange between Moses and Aaron. Maybe we want to hear how Moses responds to the excuses that Aaron makes: blaming the people, possibly even blaming Moses, and then implying that he was really not to blame at all. “I [just] threw it into the fire,” Aaron says, “and out came this calf.” But we all know better, don't we? We read in verses 3-4:

➤ Exodus 32:3–4 — So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

The point is not that there was no validity in any of Aaron's excuses, but that all of his excuses were just showing his complete failure to really understand the *evil* of this sin. No doubt, this wasn't what Aaron had wanted. The text paints a picture of the people gathering together *against*

Aaron, pressuring him, maybe even threatening him. (cf. Exod. 32:1) And yet, if one really understands the evil of idolatry, if one really **hates** and abhors it as he should, if one really **loves** and treasures the law that God has spoken and given to the people—**is there any excuse?** How often do we have excuses that are valid as far as they go, but in the end, all they ever do is reveal how lightly we treat sin? We're never told how Moses responded to Aaron, but we are told later that "the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him" – had not Moses prayed. (Deut. 9:20)

We're never told how Moses responded to Aaron, but that's not the point. The point is this vivid contrast between the burning anger of Moses and the excuses of Aaron – between the man who saw this evil for what it really was ("What did this people do to you that you have brought **such a great sin** upon them?"), and the man who perhaps saw it to be an evil, but not the evil that he should have if he had truly loved and revered the precious gift of God's covenant law. And so we come to verses 25-26.

**V. Exodus 32:25–26a** — And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me."

Here's what we might call the line in the sand. The "gate," here, is a figure of speech for any one of the main entrances leading into the camp. So, Moses takes his position at the edge of the camp, draws the line in the sand, and says, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me."

Today, we don't like to think in terms of sides – in terms of a line in the sand. But at the end of the day, it's one of the most basic and fundamental themes in the Bible. "Who is on the Lord's side?" Who is on the Lord's side **on the Lord's terms**; **NOT** on the "Lord's side" via the golden calf or any other product of our imaginations? (Durham) "Come to me."

**V. Exodus 32:26b–28** — And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.

We know that this death and judgment is what comes to *all* idolaters. Do we **believe** that? Or do we just say the words? That God should assign the death penalty to these idolaters shouldn't be any surprise to us at all. And yet the fact remains that this isn't always what God does – even in the Old Testament. There is *much* that waits for the *final* judgment. So, why does He do *this*, *here*? Really, it's very, *very* simple.

The people of Israel are the people through whom God has purposed to bring blessing and salvation to all the nations of the world. It's to *this* end that God has redeemed Israel—and not any other nation\*—from their cruel bondage and slavery in Egypt. It's to *this* end that God has given to Israel—and not to any other nation—His covenant and His law. It's to this end that God has purposed to give to Israel—and not to any other nation—the blessing of His presence at the

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\* Cf. Deut. 4:32-35; Psalm 147:19-20

tabernacle in their very midst. Israel has been the recipient of unspeakable privilege. And all this privilege is **to the end** that Israel might exist as the channel for God's salvation to come to all the nations of the world – so that even the Gentiles might turn to God *from idols*(!) and be delivered from the wrath to come. (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10)

When we see Israel in the big picture of redemptive history—when we see Israel in the big picture of God's saving plan for the world—perhaps then we can see *this* idolatry in *this* moment by *this* people **for what it really is**. It is, humanly *and biblically* speaking, the jeopardizing of the entire plan of redemption and the end of any hope for this world. (cf. Exod. 32:9-10) It's a cancer—malignant and festering—that *must*, absolutely **must**, be **cut out** and removed.

But are there any within the people of Israel who are still able to see this sin and idolatry in their midst for what it really is? By calling the Levites to carry out the death sentence on their own “brothers,” and their own “neighbors,” and their own “companions,” God is actually just calling the people to take part in the work of their own self-preservation as the channel for His salvation. God would have the people themselves know and recognize *what* this evil *is*, and be *willing* to go to *whatever length* to remove it from their midst. And so the scholar who reads this passage and then publishes an essay titled, “The Immorality of God,” has obviously been utterly blinded to the truth. What this author fails to see is that this **so-called** “immorality of God” (may it never be!) is precisely what has preserved for *him* even the possibility and the hope<sup>†</sup> that he, even *he*, might be saved. Maybe now, then, we can better understand what we read in verse 29:

**VI. Exodus 32:29** — And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.”

God connects the priestly service of the Levites to a consecration achieved at the cost of striking down even their own sons and brothers. God connects the blessing of the Levites in serving at the tabernacle with their zeal in being *truly* jealous with *His* jealousy. (cf. Num. 25:7-13) So, in Deuteronomy, Moses writes of the sons of Levi:

➤ **Deuteronomy 33:8–11** (cf. NASB) — Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one... who said of his father and mother, “I regard them not”; he did not acknowledge his brothers, nor did he recognize his own sons. For they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.

It's true that we will never be called to literally strike down our own father or mother, or brother, or son. But the point of this text is not for us to go away relieved, but rather to go away asking ourselves the question: If I had lived in *that* day, among *that* people, in *those* circumstances, would *I* have been that Levite who crossed over to Moses? (cf. Mat. 10:37; Luke 14:26; Deut. 13:6-11) Would I have truly seen this sin for what it really and truly was? Would I have seen that it was a festering cancer jeopardizing even the very existence of God's people? (I don't use that analogy lightly.) Would the depth of my love and reverence for the two tablets of the

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<sup>†</sup> I do not use “hope” here in its biblical sense as a 100% certainty and conviction that is an “anchor for the soul,” but rather in the popular sense as that which remains, at least humanly speaking, a mere potentiality.

testimony—written by the finger of God—be evidenced in my corresponding hatred and abhorrence for the sin that breaks that covenant?

## **Conclusion**

The Psalmist writes:

- Psalm 119:163 — I **hate and abhor** falsehood, but I **love** your law.

In another place, the Psalmist exhorts us:

- Psalm 97:10 — O you who **love** the LORD, **hate** evil!

And the Apostle Paul gives us this command:

- Romans 12:9 (cf. Eph. 5:11-12) — **Abhor** what is evil; **hold fast** [in love!] to what is good.

Each one of these Scriptures reinforces what we learn from our passage this morning: To hate and abhor evil—wherever it appears and in all its forms—is *always* the flip side of a true and genuine love for God’s law. In fact, the strength of our “hatred” can be a very accurate measure of the strength of our love. *On the other side of the coin*, it is always the strength of our genuine **love** for God and His law that measures whether any of our “hatred” is truly righteous and holy. So, notice the cause of the Psalmist’s burning anger. He writes:

- Psalm 119:53, 97 (cf. 119:58; 136; 25:6; Amos 5:15; Eph. 5:11-12) — **Hot indignation** seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake your law... Oh how I **love** your law! It is my meditation all the day.

We’re not talking, here, about a personal, vengeful hatred of sinners. Next week we’ll see that Moses prays again *for* the people and even asks that if God will not forgive them, then may he himself be blotted out of God’s book of life! (cf. Exod. 32:30-32) We read in Acts 17:

- Acts 17:16 — Now while Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was **provoked** within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

“Provoked” is probably too tame a word. One translation says that “his spirit was **greatly upset**.” (NET) The lexicon says that in some languages this word “must be rendered idiomatically as ‘his heart was eating him’ or ‘his stomach was hot.’” (LN) Paul was burning up with a distressed kind of anger. And so what did he do?

- Acts 17:17 — So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

It was Paul’s abhorrence and hatred of idols—expressing his deep love and reverence for the one true God—that provoked him to preach the Gospel so boldly to all the idol-worshippers in Athens. Perhaps a greater anger and hatred would give us, too, a greater boldness in evangelism. Perhaps,

too, we would know a greater personal holiness if we had a greater hatred and a deeper loathing of sin. I think of what the Psalmist says in Psalm 101:

- Psalm 101:3 — I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me.

A heart ablaze with love for God and for His law is a heart that will, by default, burn with anger. On the other hand, a heart that burns with a true anger over sin is a heart that must also be ablaze with a deep love and reverence for God. In the end, we can say this: A healthy hatred of sin is a good and necessary thing in so far as it is an expression of our love for *Christ*.

We started out this morning with a detailed description of the two tablets of the testimony: [They were] tablets... written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.” We saw that before we can understand Moses’ anger, we must truly understand what it is that he carries in his hands – the sum and substance of the covenant relationship between God and the people that He has **loved** and **redeemed** and **called to Himself**. Once we truly understand this, treasuring and loving God’s law as Moses did, then *we*, too, will be angry – just like Moses was. **How much more**, then, when we see Jesus suffering and dying because of our sin? Some two hundred years ago, the hymn writer said it this way: “Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose your evil great, **here** may view its nature rightly, **here** your guilt may estimate.” (Thomas Kelly: “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted”) The other side of a growing love for Christ will **always be** a growing **hatred** of sin. May the Lord teach us and work in us *this kind* of hatred—and *this kind* of love. Call sin what it is. Make no excuses. Root it out thoroughly and at all costs (cf. Mat. 5:29-30). Abhor it and hate it because you have come to truly see, and understand, and feel the infinite worth of Christ.