

Great Sin and a Greater Savior (Exodus 32:21-35)

Excuses, excuses...it starts with kids blaming siblings, later parents. It starts with our 1st parents

- God asks Adam ‘what have you done...did you eat?’ But Adam points to the side and up.
- ‘*The woman you gave me gave me the fruit I ate.*’ Her excuse ‘*the serpent made me do it*’
- The apple didn’t far fall from the tree in their son: ‘*I dunno, am I my brother’s keeper?!*’
- In Proverbs, a sluggard’s excuse not to work: ‘*There might be a lion in the streets, man!*’
- In the gospel banquet, why didn’t one come? ‘*I bought a field, I should look at tonight.*’
- ‘King Saul, why didn’t you wipe out the Amalekites and their animals like God said?’
 - o ‘*I did obey [bleating animals] but **the people** took some animals to worship God*’

Today in Ex 32 we’ll see that same phrase ‘the people,’ with maybe the lamest excuse ever

- But God doesn’t allow the blame game, even for people with a traumatic past as slaves
- Even with psychological scars from babies ripped out their arms by murderous Egyptians
- There were things from their upbringing that would cause them to seek comfort in images
- Aaron was in a tough spot facing a mob asking him to make gods and Moses maybe dead
- But there’s no excuse to making a young bull of gold and proclaiming worship at its altar

And Rom 2 says we’re without excuse for our sin

Ex 32:21 *And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that **you have brought such a great sin upon them?**”* ²² *And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know **the people**, that **they** are set on evil.* ²³ *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.’* ²⁴ *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.**”* ²⁵ *And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), [maybe far off Amalekites or Arabs watching, mocking Israel gone wild?] ²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him.*

Questions in this text God inspired for us:

1. Will you admit sin or excuse it?
2. Who is on the Lord’s side?
3. How can great sin be dealt with?

Will you admit or excuse sin is where v. 21 starts? Will you take ownership or make excuses?

- Aaron, did someone trip you, you hit your head? They put a bow and arrow to your head?
- What in the world happened, and what in the Word of God allows you to let this happen?
- Aaron was to be the high priest of worship, not Woodstock, not a Burning Man festival
- But he led drinking and revelry until Moses crashed the party and smashed stone tablets
- Like pulling the plug on it, Moses brings it to a grinding halt, grinding the calf to pieces
- He’d left Aaron in charge, so when the music stops, the buck should stop with Aaron

Will he pass the buck (or bull)? Will you admit or excuse?

In v. 22 Aaron basically tells Moses ‘don’t get all hot.’ Some used to say ‘don’t have a cow!’

- Aaron talks like it’s no big deal or big sin, but if there are big sinners, it’s ‘the people’
- He’s reminding his little brother, ‘you know these guys, they’re set on evil, you know’
- ‘What was I thinking? It all happened so fast, they pressured me to throw gold in a fire’
- ‘And that bull came out! The people made me do it, then the fire did it! Unbelievable!’
- Moses isn’t believing it or buying it, but I hear lame excuses from kids, from you, me
 - o Don’t laugh off Aaron and let yourself off the hook for your pathetic excuses
 - o Maybe not a cow, but to give in the crowd, pressure to not do what God tells us to

- There's pressure to not believe or speak God's Word on marriage or gender or Genesis 1
- Evolution is a god like this, things thrown together and out comes design but no designer
- Out of the fire of a big explosion came created order and creatures, it just so happened?
- It's far more ridiculous than Aaron claiming the cow self-created to say the cosmos did
- But our world worships Darwinism and determinism, you can re-create a sexual identity
- Even church is recreated, throw together a concert and culture and think out comes God
- Or more personally, Christians can talk like their sin came out of nowhere, just happened

What you put in is what comes out in the fire. Will you admit your disobedience?

What's your excuse for not having regular time in the Word, prayer, evangelism, discipleship?

- When was the last time you admitted you're wrong and didn't talk about other's wrongs?
- When people challenge you or correct you, what's your response? Your responsibility?
- If you do apologize, is it "I'm sorry *but...*"? Is it then about others, stress, a bad day, etc.?
- Is it ok to sin if others don't meet your needs (wants) or is sin caused by low self-esteem?
 - o No, I need to love others more, not self, and stop passing blame to everyone else
 - o Culture says 'be true to yourself,' Jesus says 'die to self and be true to your Savior'
 - o I don't seek soul care from a shrink, point me to a big God who makes self shrink
- I must decrease, He must increase, Him maximized and sin not minimized or rationalized
- Parents blame anyone but their kid, kids blame parents (or lack), adults blame their past
- What the Bible calls sin is given psychological labels, iniquity is renamed an imbalance
- For poor responses, many blame it on the brain¹ or offer a lame excuse to put it on you
- I know some issues are medical or difficult, but for how we respond, we're accountable
- There are some things from your background you can't help, but God's Word can help
- To finger-pointers, hope starts when you own and take responsibility, and don't evade it

Don't make excuses, make it right, admit and ask 'please forgive me for...'

Aaron's excuses sound ridiculous, but so can ours. And here's the deal: sin makes you stupid

- Ps 115 says idols are dumb, blind, lifeless, and '*those who make them become like them*'
- Sin makes us spiritually lifeless and unfeeling, blind to consequences, it makes us dumb
- In Ex 32, v. 8 they quickly turned away to this calf, and became like a calf that runs away
- In v. 10 God calls Israel 'stiff-necked,' like a calf not yet broken resisting a master's yoke
- Later prophets describe Israel here like stubborn heifers needing to be reined, regathered²
- v. 25 says Israel had broken loose at the calf, they're running wild like a herd of calves
- It's loose morally like in pagan worship of animals the people acted like animals in heat³

Made in God's image, they made a likeness of livestock and became like it

- Ps 106:20 *They exchanged the glory of God for an image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God...*
- Rom 1 says we do the same with other images, professing to be wise, we become fools
 - o Hearts are darkened and hardened, it says, like the hard idol worshipped in the dark
 - o Israel exchanged God for a grass-eating ox, and we stupidly exchange and change
 - o But the flip side is beholding God's glory changes us to its image, 2 Cor 3:18 says
- Worshipping God changes us positively, but worship of false gods changes us negatively
 - o Israel became like an ox for sacrifice, and images of immorality can do that to us
- Pr 7:22: '*at once he followed her, as an ox goes to the slaughter...it will cost him his life*'
 - o Sexual temptation given into is a type of idolatry that makes you like a dumb ox
 - o Adultery and pornography makes you stupid and is an altar that sacrifices your life
 - o Don't make excuses, take responsibility and seek accountability with God's family
 - o If you idolize money, you'll turn green, addiction to a small screen makes us small

G.K. Beale wrote We Become What We Worship. ‘What do you and I reflect?... God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures... we either reflect the Creator or something in creation ... What [Israel in Ex 32] revered, they became like, and this likeness ruined them...what you revere you resemble, either for ruin or for restoration’⁴

Good news is worshipping Christ makes you resemble Him and be Christlike

Which takes us to our 2nd question, straight out of the text in v. 26: **Who is on the Lord’s side?**

Abraham Lincoln was reportedly asked during the Civil War which side of the war God was on

- His reply: ‘I do not boast that God is on my side. I humbly pray that I am on God’s side’⁵

- Aaron isn’t so in v. 26 Moses rallies the Levites with ‘*Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me.*’

²⁷ *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.’”* ²⁸ *And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.* 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.”*

- We hope to ordain new deacons / elders maybe next year, but we won’t ordain like this!

- v. 27 doesn’t sound very seeker-friendly! Seek friends or family in sin and stab ‘em dead!

- Ever-smiling TV preachers or topical talks don’t talk on this, but we exposit whole books

- This isn’t popular in churches who give the people what they want in worship, like Aaron

- But worship is about what God wants and says, who He is, including holy hatred of sin

Are you offended at God here? If you’d rather have a different God, you offend Him like Ex 32

- And this isn’t unjust, Israel agreed to this system of justice for idolaters back in chap 24

- Israel made covenant promises: obedient worship to God alone at the threat of their death

- Blood was thrown on them as they heard the law to say our blood be on us if we violate it

- Cutting a covenant in blood is saying ‘may I die like this animal if I break this covenant’

- This was a capital offense what they did, and in context God gave fair warning they heard

- 22:20 *He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed* (NASB95)

It shouldn’t shock us 3,000 were, what’s surprising is the other 3 million or so weren’t

Earlier in the chapter God’s wrath threatened to consume all of them for their national apostasy

- But in His wrath He remembers mercy. It’s because of His mercies we are not consumed

- Ps 106:23 *‘he said he would destroy them, had not Moses...stood in the breach...to turn away his wrath’*

- But Moses has special revelation we don’t and somehow knows who must still be purged

99.999% of Israel lived, all women and children, but 3,000 men fell, maybe worst ringleaders?

- Jesus said it’s still better to face swift violent death than to cause believers to sin, Mt 18:6

- In scripture there’s stricter judgment for those who falsely teach or lead others into evil⁶

Commentators explain: ‘in all likelihood the Levites only killed the instigators, the men who were most responsible for Israel’s sin. When God told them to kill their brothers and neighbors, the point was ...

whoever was guilty had to be punished. The Levites were not to let the ties of blood or friendship hinder them from their service to God. Not even family and friends were to be spared, if they refused to follow God.’⁷

Another note on v. 27 when it says ‘the Levites were...to “go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other,” [that] means carefully and systematically approaching everyone and finding out whether or not they intend to return to Yahweh, abandoning their idolatry. Those found to

be committed to idolatry must be killed. Those sorry for being caught up in it but now actively repenting must be spared. A parallel situation occurred later...As the Num 25 passage makes clear,

only those who engaged committedly in idolatry were put to death, not everyone indiscriminately.’⁸

Ex 32 doesn't answer all questions, like why can Aaron still live and be high priest?

Dt 9 is the rest of the story where Moses adds how he interceded in prayer for his guilty brother and the others: *I lay prostrate before the LORD for...I dreaded the fierce anger of the LORD against you: his wrath would destroy you. Yet once again the LORD listened to me. With Aaron, too, the LORD was deeply angry, and would have killed him had I not prayed for him also at that time* (v. 18-20 NAB). God would've killed if no intercessor

God was deeply angry at Aaron who would've died without a mediator

That takes us to the 3rd and final question for our time today: How can great sin be dealt with?

We see 'great sin' in v. 26 where Moses tells Aaron: '*you have brought such a great sin upon them*'³⁰ *The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."*³¹ *So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold."*³² *But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."*³³ *But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book."*³⁴ *But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."*³⁵ *Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made*

- Aaron and they still had culpability and consequences for sin, but they're not consumed
- Some lives were blotted out, others had their sin visit again, and all Israel was plagued
- I think of John Newton, once in the great sin of slave-trading till he knew amazing grace
- He never got over these 2 facts he wrote: 'I am a great sinner, but I have a great Savior.'
- It made him a better leader like I think it did for Aaron, Peter the denier, Paul the killer
- John the racist Samaritan-hater was the disciple Jesus loved and became a better apostle of love
- He wrote: '*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us*' (1 Jn 1:9)
- That takes us back to the 1st question: will you excuse sin or admit or confess your sin?
- Confess literally means say the same thing about your sin that God does, taking His side
- That's the 2nd question: are you on the Lord's side? Do you side with Him vs. your sin?
- Joshua was at the side of Moses when he heard the rally cry 'Who is on the Lord's side?'
- Joshua later brought up idols of the fathers and said '*choose you this day whom you will serve*'⁹
- Jesus said '*No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money*' (Mt 6:24)
 - o No competing allegiance or affection, love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul
- You must take sides, yours or the Lord's. He says you're either with Him or against Him
- The NT church isn't to execute sinners, it can only excommunicate unrepentant sinners
- But Mt 18:7 says for you, cut off your hand or whatever causes sin (metaphorical sword)

Cut off access to or avenue for sin, make no provision for the flesh and its lusts¹⁰

Today the sword of death is given to the state, not the church, but Jesus has a sword of division: Mt 10:34 *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*³⁵ *For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*³⁶ *And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.*³⁷ *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*³⁸ *And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

Taking up a cross=death to self that day. Follow=love more than any other relationship

- We're not OT Levites coming with swords, but the NT ends with Jesus coming with His sword
- At His return a double-edged sword comes out His mouth to strike down the unrepentant
 - And His Word even now is a sword that cuts through excuses in our soul and spirit
- 'Put to death...in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and **covetousness, which is idolatry**'¹¹*
- Don't dabble with it, destroy it. Lusts can't be coddled, they're to be crucified, Gal 5:24
 - Whatever you idolize, don't excuse or minimize it, pulverize it like Moses did in v. 20
 - I know testimonies here where sin was taken out with the trash or flushed down a toilet

- Moses crushed and made them drink bitter remains, the idol waste became their waste
- Expelled out their bowels (affections in OT), there's expulsive power in a new affection¹²
- Affection for Christ over sin, as a Puritan said 'till sin is bitter, Christ will not be sweet'¹³
- As you taste and see the Lord is good, you'll lose your taste for those artificial substitutes
- And remember what you most love and worship you become like, good news if it's Jesus

Moses was revering the Lord and is resembling the Lord in v. 30, seeking to make atonement.

³² *But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.*

- In ch 17 God said to write in a book the name Amalek and his memory will be blotted out
- In ch 30 God talked about a census with names of all living Israelites, the closest context

In historical context, blotting out=earthly life (not eternal life in later revelation)

- Think a register of citizens, as they die, names are blotted out (not whiteout, blacked out)
- In 32:10 God says He'll wipe out all Israel except Moses, but here Moses reverses that
- Moses asks 'if sin requires names to be blotted out in death, make it my name, not theirs'
- I think it's the OT version of Paul in Rom 9:3 willing to be cut off in death to save Israel

³³ *But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." ³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place...* That makes some scholars think this book is names who will enter the promised land?

- All these sinner's lives would be blotted out later and not enter Canaan (including Aaron)
- That fits the end of v. 34 for a later day when their sins will be visited on that generation
- Joshua, Caleb, and a younger generation weren't blotted out and were led into that place

Moses wants to make atonement by dying instead of sinners, but only a sinless substitute can

- The only way great sin can be deal with is by one greater than Moses, our greater Savior!
- Moses had to ask if God can forgive them; Jesus prays on the cross '*Father, forgive them...*'
- Moses said 'perhaps I can make atonement possible'; Jesus actually does for His people
 - o Jesus made atonement, paid His own life blotted out, and was raised from the dead

Spotless Lamb of God was He, full atonement, can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!

- Guilty are we but the cross bore the wrath and took the blame we can't blame-shift away
- As we turn from lame excuses and shameful sin, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers!
- Better than Aaron having his brother pray for him is Jesus interceding for all His brothers
- We deserve to be pierced through for our sin, but Jesus was pierced for our transgression!
- Instead of sinners blotted out, Acts 3:19: *Repent and turn back that your sins may be blotted out.*

There's another book, not of living Jews in the land, but all believing Jesus as the Lamb of God who says Rev 3:5: *I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father*

....

Let's confess Jesus' name, confess sin without excuses, and come to Him all on the Lord's side.

- Let's intercede for our nation and congregation to be kept from great sin by a great Savior

Closing communion hymn: We bow in preparation, For sin we search our hearts,
 Forsaking each transgression, As God His light imparts;
 We take the cup in rev'rence, And new commitment make,
 To cast out ev'ry idol, And live for Jesus' sake.

¹ For more on this see, Ed Welch, *Blame it on the Brain: Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders and Disobedience*.

² Hosea 4:16-17. This point is indebted to G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (IVP, 2008), 78-84.

³ KJV of v. 25 has ‘nakedness,’ others take more generally as indecency or moral looseness, but the verb for “play” in v. 6 also can have sexual overtones (Genesis 26:8, 39:14) and we know drinking in v. 6 to drunkenness leads to debauchery (Ephesians 5:18). It may also be instructive that 1 Corinthians 10:6-8 mentions sexual immorality after this event, but the 23,000 likely are another day.

⁴ Beale, p. 11, 16, 36.

⁵ As cited in *Our Daily Bread*, August 20, 2008.

⁶ James 3:1, Luke 20:47, etc. Note how Jesus spoke greatest woe to the Jewish leaders and how the NT letters address false teachers.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 1011.

⁸ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 2:681–682.

⁹ Joshua 24:15 KJV.

¹⁰ Romans 13:14, Matthew 5:29-30, etc.

¹¹ Colossians 3:5.

¹² See the classic sermon by Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”

¹³ Attributed to Thomas Brooks.