

Bible Study Guide

PASTORATE

September 18, 2013

Lectionary Readings

Psalm 51:1–18; **Exodus 32:1, 7–14**; 1 Timothy 1:12–17; Luke 15:1–10

Context

The incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32 is the low point of the book. Up until this juncture, God has acted on behalf of his people: he sees the oppression they suffer in Egypt and hears their cries for deliverance (1–2); he commissions Moses (3–6); he sends plagues upon the Egyptians (7–11) that result in the Passover and the exodus itself (12–14); and then he leads them through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai (15–18) and establishes a covenant with them (19–24). And yet, only a few months after the exodus, Israel break covenant by crafting and worshipping a golden calf.

The final section of Exodus (25–40) tells of the design and construction of the tabernacle. Chapters 32–34 serve as a dramatic interruption to the overall flow of this account. The making of the golden calf occurs while Moses is receiving instructions for building God’s dwelling among his people, which poignantly raises a fundamental question about the covenant: How can the holy God dwell among sinful people?

Exodus 32:1, 7–14

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, 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.”...

⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a 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!’ ” ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” ¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Commentary

Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai receiving instructions from God (24:18), during which time the Israelites lost hope of his return. They *gathered against* Aaron (rather than just *around*) pressuring him to take the lead in making for the people a golden calf. Aaron succumbed, which resulted in Israel breaking the covenant's first two commandments after promising to do everything that the LORD had spoken (19:8).

The LORD instructs Moses to return to *his* people to see for himself how quickly they turned from the covenant, revealing with anger his intentions to destroy them and start over with Moses himself. Is it possible that God is testing Abraham here—offering him a chance at glory, an opportunity to replace Abraham as the father of the faith? Some commentators think so. God could have acted without expressing his intentions out loud, but by doing so his words become an invitation for Moses to respond (similar to Abraham's exchange with God about the destruction of Sodom in Gen 18:17–33).

Moses' reply is an intercession on behalf of Israel, pleading with God to change his mind (cf. Ps 106:23). It's as if Moses is making his case as to why God destroying his people would be a bad idea: "these are *your* people whom *you* delivered, and *your* reputation would be tarnished among the nations if they were destroyed, and don't forget the promise *you* made to Abraham and his descendants." Amazingly, the text declares, *the Lord changed his mind*.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things that stand out to you in this passage?
2. Like the Israelites in our story, we quickly forget or take for granted much of what God has done for us.
 - a. What is something God has done for you recently you shouldn't forget?
 - b. What are some creative ways we can help ourselves remember?
3. Do you think God tested Moses? Does God test us today? Why or why not?
4. How might Moses' intercession for Israel inform our praying for others?
 - a. Should our prayers for others take a similar tone? Why or why not?
 - b. Should we "make a case" to God in our prayers? Why or why not?
 - c. Should we "remind" God of his promises and character? Why or why not?
5. How responsive do you think God is to our prayers? Does God really ever "change his mind" in response to our prayers?
6. How does this passage encourage you and your faith?

Collect of the Day

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*.