

March 17

Scriptures: Read Exodus 32

Key Verse: “Yet now, if You will forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.” (Exodus 32:32)

Overview

It had been thirty-nine or forty days since Moses had left the people below and ascended Mount Sinai. They probably thought he was dead, for they may have lacked faith that God was able to care for Moses and provide him with food and water. When Moses, their mediator was absent they might have believed that God was absent too, however God saw all their actions (32:7) and He even saw their hearts. For this reason, they pressured Aaron to make them a god to go before them on their journey. He was probably afraid to stand up against them. He admitted they were “set on evil” (32:22), so there was no telling what they might do if he refused them. Still he had no backbone to stay firm and uphold the Lord’s commands. Aaron did not have the communion with God which Moses had, and he had to be strong, withstand temptation, and lead in that difficult nation.

The calf, or a young bull, was one of the main gods in Egypt; it was called Apis, which represented fertility and strength. The Israelites held a feast in its honor, accompanied by lewd dancing and immorality connected with the pagan fertility cult. How could this awful apostasy of breaking the first two important commandments come so soon after their miraculous deliverance, the thundering of God’s voice, and after they had all agreed to obey Him and enter into a covenant relationship with Him? As God told Moses, they were truly a “stiff-necked people” (32:9), the expression coming from a stubborn ox or horse that refuses to be turned by the reins.

Because their wickedness in breaking the covenant provoked the wrath of God, He told Moses of His intention to wipe out all Israel and start fresh with just Moses and His descendants as His chosen people (32:10). This was a real test of Moses’ character and his love for his people. He responded in the right way. Preferring Israel’s preservation over his own honor, he interceded on their behalf, recalling God’s promise to the patriarchs, but Moses’ main concern was for the honor of God (32; 12. 25). Because of his desperate plea, the Lord agreed to not totally destroy the Israelites, but immediate discipline and punishment was still required for the unrepentant. The wickedness of our society provokes the wrath of God who would consume the sinners were it not for the prayers of the saints and the mediation of His Son. God is truly merciful; He does not take pleasure in seeing men die, but rather takes pleasure in forgiving those sinners who come unto Him. Surely Aaron repented, or else God would not have allowed him to become the high priest, but here we see him trying to make excuses and blame the people (32:22-24). Yet, Moses considered him responsible as he had been in charge during Moses’ absence.

The actual sight of the people’s sin affected Moses more than hearing of it. With righteous indignation, he threw down and broke the stone tablets, representing the covenant which had already been broken by their hearts and deeds. He made the people internalize their sin by drinking water into which he had thrown the powder from the golden calf which he had burned. Still most remained unrepentant and stubborn, for only the tribe of Levi quickly expressed shame

and repentance in going over to the side of the Lord with Moses (32:26). Punishment followed those who did not respond to the call of grace and mercy; three thousand men died by the sword.

Today, God is mercifully waiting for people's repentance and acceptance of His new covenant with His Son Jesus before the great and terrible judgment day. Let us be like Moses (not Aaron, who went along with the crowd) and lead others to walk in the way of righteousness. If we do not, we can be held responsible for their punishment (Ezekiel 33:8). Moses, as their mediator, tried to make atonement by offering himself to die for the people if it would cause God to forgive and restore them (32:32). This, however, was not God's plan. Only Jesus Christ could make the all-sufficient atonement for the sins of others. God told Moses that the sinner alone would be punished, not he, and God accomplished this by sending a plague among them. Moses' intercession, however, preserved the nation of Israel and their entrance into Canaan under God's protection. Our fervent prayers do make a difference, so be encouraged and keep on praying!

Prayer

Almighty God, help me to learn to intercede in prayer for others. Thank You for our mighty intercessor, the Lord Jesus Christ.