

Revelations From Rebellion

Exodus 32:1–34:35

Series: Book of Exodus [#19]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

September 6, 2009

Introduction

When God called Abraham long before the events in Exodus, He told him,

“Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

The key factor for Abraham’s relationship with God was faith. Faith in God and being faithful to God have always been critical from Adam and Eve to ourselves.

Israel was called to have faith in God and be faithful to Him. Moses reminded them,

“O Israel, you should listen and be careful to do it [all God’s commands], that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deuteronomy 6:3)

But we also recall some of his other words to them,

“When the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice. You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you.” (Deuteronomy 9:23-24)

God’s relationship with His people is pictured in a number of ways in the Bible. One of them is marriage. His people are to be faithful to Him. Percy Arrosmith died on June 10 at the age of 105. He and his wife Florence had celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary on June 1, making them the couple with the longest marriage in England at that time.

Contrast that with the couple married in Germany in June who, right after the ceremony, got into a fight with the groom trying to cut his bride’s hair with a kitchen knife. The police were called. The couple asked for an immediate annulment. *What a contrast between these two couples!*

Exodus chapters 32 through 34 give us the unpleasant scene of Israel, once again, rebelling against God. There are some important *Revelations From Rebellion* in this section. Revelations about faith and faithfulness. We see a *stark contrast* in faith and faithfulness between Moses and the people as a whole. We also see a *solid constant* in God’s faithfulness.

A Stark Contrast.

We begin with the stark contrast. The scene opens with Moses up on Mt. Sinai with God, while down in the camp the people were quickly deserting God. A group came to Aaron, Moses' elder brother and deputy leader, demanding "make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (32:1).

Chapter 24 verse 18 tells us Moses was up on the mountain with God for forty days at this time. The people had become impatient. They wanted to get moving, to march on to their new land. Back in chapter 20, just before Moses went up to this meeting with God, the people asked Moses to be their representative and mediator with God. They recognized and reaffirmed the role God gave him as their leader. But now, after less than six weeks in which every day they could look up at the mountain and see the visible display of God's presence in the cloud, they gave up on Moses. They wanted something they could see, a representation of God, an idol. They quickly had set aside, broken the second Commandment, and possibly also the first.

Without any hint of protest, Aaron said "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me" (32:2). This is interesting, surprising, and disappointing. Aaron has been Moses' spokesman. He was accustomed to dealing with the people. There has been no hint of him being weak-kneed up to this point. Nonetheless, Aaron caved in to the people's demand. He took the gold jewelry, melted it down and, it is generally concluded, had a wooden figure of a calf or bull made. Then sheets of gold were placed over it and fashioned into this figure, this idol.

Okay, you have this idol representing God. What do you do with it? Look at verse 5 in chapter 32.

"he [Aaron] built an altar before it [the idol]; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.' So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play." (5-6)

Whatever their motives were, Aaron and the people made this idol the focal point of worship in a special celebration. The word "play" in verse six was frequently used of sexual activity. That may well have been the case here. A wild, out of control, immoral scene, as in many pagan religions. How quickly they deserted following, obeying and worshiping God as He had so clearly directed.

We could never see ourselves following this specific example. Yet the danger of deserting God, even quickly deserting God, is always present. The apostle Paul opened his letter to the churches in Galatia with both guns blazing,

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:6-9)

You see, there were false teachers running around telling people that salvation and/or spiritual growth came about by keeping the Old Testament Law. Some accepted this teaching, leaving the gospel of grace and faith for a false gospel based on works.

The truth of the gospel, of our faith, is critically important. From Paul’s day to our day there always have been false teachers leading people away from Christ and His truth. I am speaking here of differences on points of doctrine that are essential to the gospel, to the true faith. In the Free Church we champion the guideline “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”

Our church leaders are committed to staying true to Christ and His gospel in our own lives and as a church. That is why the Bible is central here at Knox. We rely on the Holy Spirit to teach, guide, convict, to build us up as we study and live the Bible’s truth and, yes, to keep us following Christ, not deserting Him.

From time to time this commitment requires drawing some lines. Last week Pastor Tyler showed me a magazine for youth and young adults we receive each year. It promotes Bible Schools, other Christian post-secondary institutions and missions organizations. This issue had a full page ad from a heresy-laden organization. The ad was what I call *evangelically generic*—a picture of the Bible, and an invitation to connect to the Bible by connecting with them. Pastor Tyler notified the publication not to send us future issues because he is serious about God’s call to teach and protect our youth and young adults, including not placing traps of false teachers in front of them.

Israel quickly deserted obeying and worshiping God according to His truth. We need to take care not to do that, especially since many today even in evangelical circles do not value truth, and so faithfulness, as they should.

Moses was a stark contrast to Aaron and the people as he steadfastly held to God. Put yourself in Moses’ place. He was having a mountain top experience with God—literally and spiritually—when God said, “It’s time for you to go now. The people you led out of Egypt have been acting corruptly, immorally, abominably.” How would you have felt if you were Moses?

- Disappointed? Certainly.
- Upset? “I leave them alone, and look at what they are doing! They have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew them!”

- Embarrassed? “They are my responsibility. What did I do wrong? What could I have done to prevent this?”

Notice a few phrases that describe how Moses reacted to this.

- 32:11. “Then Moses entreated the LORD his God ...”
- 32:31. “Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said ...”
- 33:12. “Then Moses said to the LORD ...”

Moses kept talking with God. He kept praying. Prayer is a clear evidence of holding to God, trusting Him.

Moses prayer of intercession for the people is a good model for us in all our prayer. God told him in 32:10, “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.” God was not ordering Moses to not intercede. He was testing Moses to see if he would intercede. All of Moses’ intercession is based on the character and actions of God, not on anything in the people themselves.

First, he prayed for mercy on the basis of God having chosen Israel as His people and what He already had done in delivering them from slavery in Egypt. Verse 11. “O LORD, why does Your anger burn against *Your people* whom *You have brought out* from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

Then, he prays based on how God destroying the people would be seen by Egypt and other nations — they would think this God of Israel was cruel, even sadistic. Verse 12, “Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people.”

Next he prays for mercy based on God’s past promises to Israel. Verse 13. “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

Moses steadfastly held to, trusted in God. Why? One key factor is his character, specifically his humility. Numbers 12:3 is a parenthetical statement, an aside to the main point. It says, “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.”

It is helpful to know that the original idea behind this Old Testament word *humble* was *to force, to try to force submission, to punish, or to inflict pain on*. The connection to humility is neither strange nor strained, as it may seem at first look. You see, a truly humble person is a broken person, one who has accepted the reality that he or she is not self-sufficient, is not better than others.

God uses difficulties and His discipline to humble us. Later Moses told the people,

“You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.” (Deuteronomy 8:2-5)

God tested, humbled them to break their pride and self-sufficiency. And, as He did that, He proved He could be trusted as He also provided for their needs.

Moses was humble. Humility is key to our faith and faithfulness just as it was to his. Now let's move from the stark contrast in faith and faithfulness to a solid constant.

A Solid Constant.

Moses' world was continually changing. He faced a steady stream of new and unexpected days just as we do. Also, as much as he steadfastly held to God, his faith and faithfulness were not perfectly constant, just as ours are not. There is only one solid constant: God. He tells us in Malachi 3:6, “I, the LORD, do not change...” God's character is eternally perfect. He has never had to learn through the trial and error of experience, nor has He or will He ever swerve off course.

As we look at today's three chapters, we see God being faithful to His promises. God promised Abraham that He would make a great nation come from him. God reaffirmed and was faithful to that promise to Abraham's son Isaac, to his son Jacob, to his son Joseph and to all the generations down to Moses. Even when God threatened to destroy the people because of their “great sin” of the golden calf (32:30), God told Moses, “I will make of you a great nation” (32:10).

Some of God's promises are unconditional, while others are conditional. After the flood, when Noah was back on land, God said “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8:22). That is an unconditional promise. The state of faith and conduct of people does not affect it. The apostle Paul wrote, “If we are faithless, He [God] remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

In part of the Law recorded in Leviticus 26, God told Moses and the people,

“[But] if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My

ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up. I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you.” (14-17)

These are conditional promises in that the state of faith and conduct of the people did affect them.

As we are thinking about God being faithful to His promises based on being One who does not change, let me comment on a statement in this section which raises some questions. After God told Moses to “let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them,” Moses interceded for them praying, in part, “Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people” (32:10, 12). Moses then records in 32:14, “So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.”

So, does God change? The word “changed”, or in some versions “relented”, has the idea of being sorry, or of having compassion. There is no change of direction on God’s part here because the original action was hasty or not the best. In fact, there is no change in plan or promise at all.

Two things to keep in mind to understand this are, first, God is describing Himself in terms which we can understand. This kind of language is referred to as an anthropomorphism. We see it many times in the Bible, such as back in chapter 3 when God said “I will stretch out My *hand* and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it” (20). We know God is spirit; He does not have a hand like ours. So the phrase speaks of His power in this way so we can better grasp it.

The second thing to keep in mind is that these verses show prayer in action: Moses, the leader and intermediary for Israel, is bringing them before God. God is sovereign in all He does and, in ways we cannot come close to understanding, He uses the prayers of His people to unfold His actions in time which He determined before time began. While God was willing to destroy the people and raise up a new people from Moses, He had not declared He was going to do that. He tested Moses, inviting him to intercede for the people. When we turn ahead to Deuteronomy 9, Moses gives us this insight into the situation as he writes, “The LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time” (20).

Whether God’s promises are conditional or unconditional, directed to one person, a specific group of people, all people or our world, He is faithful. What God promises He performs. “That,” you may think, “sounds great! I’m glad it is true. *But*, on second thought, I’m not so sure it’s always true, really true in my experience, in what I’m going through.”

Let's fine tune or focus here, looking at God being faithful to His people. If you ever find yourself unable to see how God is being faithful, is being good to you in your circumstances, you have plenty of company. The story is told of the 16th century nun St. Teresa of Avila that on one of her many travels across Spain she fell off her donkey into a stream. She got up soaking wet, and proceeded to tell God "Well, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few!" She didn't see God being good to her, faithful to her in that moment.

Turn to chapter 33. At verse 12 Moses prays to God after the people repented of their sin regarding the golden calf. Moses closes with a personal request, verse 18, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" As God answers Moses He tells him in the next verse, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (19). When God fulfilled Moses' request, He repeated and expanded on this statement (34:6-7). Just as Moses and all Israel received God's grace and compassion, so do we.

Israel received the daily miracle of manna for forty years. Yes, they grumbled about it at times. Yes, they did not always see it as God's grace. But their perception did not change the reality that God was being gracious to them, that He was fulfilling His promises to provide and care for them, that He was being faithful to them.

God was also faithful to discipline those people. This is one aspect of God's faithfulness we don't like to dwell on. The penalty for idolatry was death. All those who participated in that *feast* before the golden calf deserved death. While God was merciful, He did judge the people. Go back to chapter 32. Moses has come down from the mountain and confronted Aaron and the people. Let's pick it up at verse 25.

"Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies—then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!' And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. He said to them, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day." (25-28)

We can be fairly sure that some of the men from the tribe of Levi had been involved in that idolatry. But these men chose to stand with God and Moses. They went "back and forth" in that huge camp, confronting, challenging people. They killed those who would not repent, even if they were their brothers, friends or neighbors. Moses challenged these Levites again in verse 29, "Dedicate yourselves today to the Lord—for every man has been against his son and against his brother—in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today."

As bad as this was, it was not all the punishment. At the end of the chapter God said, “I will punish them for their sin,” and Moses records, “Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made” (34b-35). No one liked or welcomed this discipline as part of God’s faithfulness. No one stood up and gave testimonies to God about the faithfulness of God in delivering this discipline. But their perception did not change the reality that it was part of God being faithful to His people.

So it was and so it is. God is faithful to His people, to you and me. He is faithful with grace and compassion to us. He is faithful to bless and discipline us.

Conclusion.

The revelations from this rebellion include the reality that God is faithful. He is always faithful to His promises and to His people, regardless of our circumstances or how we view them.

The revelations also include a call to faith and faithfulness. The King James Version rendered 32:26 as a question, “Who is on the LORD’s side?” The most basic application of that question to us is about our ultimate allegiance. Have you truly humbled yourself before God, admitting your sin, and accepted God’s salvation in Jesus Christ? There is no middle ground here. This is the point of Jesus’ clear words “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Matthew 12:30). If Jesus Christ is not your Savior, you are not on God’s side, but His invitation is open to you to come stand with Him. Do that today. Talk with me or Pastor Tyler.

The question also applies to each one of us who knows Jesus Christ as our Savior. Jesus said, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Again, “You are My friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). Can you look at last week and say, “Yes, it’s not been perfect, but I have been on the Lord’s side. I am on His side in how I think, speak and live my life.”

Some may identify with the picture painted in the song *The Secret Place* by Michael Booth.

“My heart is like a house. One day I let the Savior in. There are many rooms where we would visit now and then. But then one day He saw that door. I knew the day had come too soon. I said, ‘Jesus, I’m not ready for us to visit in that room, ‘cuz that’s a place in my heart where even I don’t go. I have some things hidden there I don’t want no one to know.’”

Do you have a *secret room*, an area, an aspect of your life where you are not on the Lord’s side, not open to His rule, where you have not truly humbled yourself before Christ, confessed and turned from the things hidden there? Once you let Christ into that secret room by confessing and repenting from the sin, He *will* forgive you and make you clean. You *will* be on His side, not being afraid any more because, as the song put it, “my hidden sin

no longer hides behind that door.”

In these next personal, quiet moments with God, thank Him that He is the solid constant, that even when you cannot see it, He is always faithful to His promises and to you. Look into your heart, answer the question “Am I on the Lord’s side?” Open the door, open all the doors of your heart to Him. Clear up anything, everything that is hiding behind closed doors. Tell God, “Yes, I *am* on Your side!”

© 2009 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

