



## TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE

### WILDERNESS APOSTASY

Exodus 32-33

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#### Introduction

As part of this series on transitions, we have been watching the ancient Israelites during their time of transition from Egypt to the Promised Land. Today we come to a low point in their story. In fact, it is such a low point that it is almost the end point for the entire nation of Israel.

Today's passage from Exodus 32-33 brings us to that tragic episode we often refer to as the 'sin with the golden calf.' Yet Israel's folly with this molten image was more than sin: it was outright idolatry and thus apostasy. Apostasy is defined as the repudiation of the faith one once professed. And that is what we are dealing with in today's passage: apostasy, open rebellion, outright rejection. We are dealing with an example of wilderness apostasy, a classic case of losing one's faith during a time of transition.

Times of transition are dangerous times for precisely this reason. Changing circumstances can often introduce disappointment into our lives; and when disappointment is left unchecked, it can result in disillusionment; and when disillusionment festers, it can turn into doubt; and when doubt is full grown, it will express itself in idolatry and eventually apostasy—outright rejection of the faith.

So today's passage has a word of warning to all professors of the faith. For perhaps no two chapters in the whole Old Testament so clearly depict the *true nature of humanity* as do these two chapters which describe Israel's slide into idolatry and apostasy. But there is also, and more importantly, a word of hope to all of us. For there are hardly any other two chapters in the whole of the Old Testament that so clearly depict the *merciful character of God* as these two chapters in the Old Testament.

#### Israel's Slide into Apostasy (32:1-6)

Let's first look at *Israel's slide into apostasy* as it is described for us in the opening verses of chapter 32.

The scene is this. Moses has led the people of Israel to the base of Mount Sinai, where they are to formally enter into a covenant relationship with God. Moses himself then ascends to the top of the mountain to receive the Law, that is, the terms of the covenant that will guide Israel's relationship with the Lord. And there he remains, so we're told in Exodus 24:18, for forty days and forty nights, shrouded behind the thick covering of a cloud of fire, a massive thunderstorm. Gone, then, was Moses, for well over a month, receiving, as we are told in Exodus 31:18, "the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."

At the base of the mountain, however, something very different is going on. As the camera swings from the top of the mountain in Exodus 31 to the base of the mountain in Exodus 32, we find Israel feeling forlorn and, frankly, frustrated with Moses' long delay. Evidently, in fact, his delay has created disillusionment within the ranks, and the Israelites begin to doubt whether

Moses is really fit to represent the divine presence to them any longer. And, as a result, the Israelites decide to take matters into their own hands: they band together against Moses' deputy, Aaron, and insist that he provide them with an alternative representation of God's presence among them. So we read in the opening verse:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, 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."

At this point, Moses no doubt would have hoped for greater resolve on the part of Aaron. But apparently the collective force of the entire nation was more than he could bear. And so he capitulates to their request, and so Israel slides at a breakneck pace into the abyss of idolatry and apostasy.

So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." <sup>6</sup> And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

So, then, we have these two scenarios developing simultaneously. At the top of the mountain, we have Moses *receiving* the covenant, the tablets of the testimony, while at the base of the mountain, we have Israel sliding into idolatry and apostasy and thus *breaking* the covenant. Not only does Israel here violate both the first and second commandments, and thus the covenant, but in this very act of apostasy she is in effect undoing the Exodus itself! Her wilderness apostasy is an undermining of her Exodus liberty. What an irony! What a tragedy!

And what a lesson for all of us about the onset and progression of apostasy in our own hearts! Apostasy often begins with disappointment, typically disappointment over a perceived lack of the presence of God in one's life. God does not seem to be present, to be real, to be working; and matters are made worse when the mediators of God's presence, people like Moses, or one's pastor, or one's church, or one's parents, don't seem to be doing what they ought to be doing in representing God's presence to us. Perhaps there's a moral failure. Or a long pattern of hypocrisy. Or they just drift out of the picture, as Moses seemed to for the Israelites.

When this happens, it leads to disillusionment and then doubt. We start to wonder whether there is anything to the presence of God after all. And when doubt is full grown, it expresses itself in idolatry: perhaps not the creation of a golden calf or some other graven image, but the creation of an alternative representation of the presence of God in one's own mind, which is idolatry nonetheless. And when this happens, apostasy is soon to follow.

This is, then, the slide into apostasy: disappointment, disillusionment, doubt, denial. This is what can happen to those who profess faith in God, and this is what happened to Israel at the foot of the mountain of God.

## **The Lord's Righteous Response (32:7-10)**

Let's us now turn, however, to consider *the Lord's righteous response* to Israel's slide into apostasy.

Of course, the Lord, who made heaven and earth, the Lord who redeemed Israel with a mighty outstretched arm, does not like idolatry, much less apostasy. The Lord does not take kindly to affronts to his supremacy. For the God of the Bible, the God of Israel, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not willing to share his glory with another, not least an idol made by human hands. "How should my name be profaned?" says the Lord. "My glory I will not give to another" (Isaiah 48:11).

As a result, while Israel played at the base of the mountain, the Lord's righteous wrath was kindled to a blaze in the face of their idolatry and apostasy. And while Moses, atop the mountain, was oblivious to what was going on at the base, the Lord saw everything indeed. And what he saw, infuriated him (vv. 7-8):

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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!"

Notice the Lord distances himself from corrupt Israel: "*your* people," he says to Moses, not "my people," those "whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt," Moses, not those whom I delivered out of Egypt. A subtle point in the text, but it says something profound about the Lord's disposition toward this wayward people: "They are no longer my people, Moses, but yours. For they have forsaken me; you can now take them as your own."

Notice, as well, the Lord declares his intention to destroy Israel and start all over (vv. 9-10):

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

Thus we see the Lord's righteous response to Israel's outright rejection of him. In the face of their idolatry and apostasy, the Lord in turn distances himself from them, and declares his intention to destroy them so that he can begin afresh with faithful Moses himself. Hence, you can see how this low point in Israel's time of transition was almost her end point.

## **Moses' Valiant Intercession (32:11-35)**

But, thankfully for Israel's sake, Moses, their faithful leader, did something gutsy in just the nick of time. While the Lord was ready to wipe the slate clean, Moses stood in the gap. As the Lord's wrath boiled to overflow, Moses courageously sought to counter by interceding on Israel's behalf. We see *Moses' valiant intercession* in the verses that follow (vv. 11-13):

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your

people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

Now, have you ever wondered what it might sound like to talk back to God? And have you ever tried to persuade God with arguments? Moses does it here, and it has much to teach us about how to appeal to the Lord in the face of great moral disasters, like a wilderness apostasy.

You see how Moses does it. He has two arguments. First, he says to the Lord: *Don't ruin your reputation by destroying Israel*. That was the point of what he says in verse 12: "Why should the Egyptians think you blew it, Lord? That would definitely make you look either cruel or incompetent, or both. Neither of which is of course true to who you are, nor good for your reputation." Thus argues Moses.

The second line of argument is in effect to say to the Lord: *Don't forget your promise by wiping out Israel*. This is the point of Moses' appeal to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (here, Israel), in verse 13: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

So to what does Moses go in the face of massive moral failure and national disaster? To what does he appeal? To what would you appeal? To where would you go in the face of a massive moral failure? Answer: *to God's reputation, and to God's word*. Appeal to God to work in a way that enhances his own glory, and appeal to God in a way that refers to what he has in fact already said he would do.

This is how Moses argued with God. And this is how we ought to argue as well. Even when the folly is great and the sin is stacked a mile high—appeal to God's reputation, God's name. This was King David's strategy. As he prays to the Lord in Psalm 25:11: "For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great." Act mercifully on my behalf, O Lord, not despite the greatness of my sin—but because of the greatness of my sin. For great sin require great forgiveness, and great forgiveness displays great mercy, and great mercy reflects greatly upon your name.

### **The Lord's Merciful Resolution (33:1-34:9)**

Evidently, Moses' valiant intercession worked, as we see in verse 14: "And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." Yet while the Lord wasn't going to wipe the slate clean, he was nevertheless going to change his program. Prior to Israel's apostasy, the Lord was of course going to go with Israel, walk with Israel, through the wilderness and to the Land of Promise. But not so any longer! No longer would he himself go with them; instead, he would send a representative, an angel, as we read in the opening of Exodus 33:

The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' <sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the

Jebusites. <sup>3</sup> Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

Naturally, Israel did not like this news. “When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments” (33:4). Moses didn’t like it either. So, yet again, we see Moses plead his case with the Lord (vv. 12-16):

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ <sup>13</sup> Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” <sup>14</sup> And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” <sup>15</sup> And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. <sup>16</sup> For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

Here, again, we see valiant Moses interceding valiantly, pleading Israel’s case on Israel’s behalf, asking for the Lord to go up, not just with him, but with all the people. And, once again, we see the Lord respond. Once again, we see *the Lord’s merciful resolution* to the whole situation (v. 17):

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

But this time, Moses is taken aback. In fact, he’s quite simply stunned by the Lord’s response. He’s flabbergasted. He evidently can’t believe his ears—that the Lord would yet again respond with such grace, such mercy. So much so that Moses can’t help himself; he’s got to get a better glimpse into the heart of this God of such grace and mercy. So he says: “Please show me your glory” (33:18).

*Show me your glory!* It was Charles Spurgeon who said of this: “That was a large request for Moses to make. He could not have asked for more . . . Why, it is the greatest petition that man ever asked of God.”<sup>1</sup>

*Show me your glory!* This is the desire of every person who’s been touched by the merciful hand of a righteous God. This is the prayer of every sinner who’s been given a fresh supply of redeeming grace. This is the longing of every soul who’s known the depths of sin and yet seen the heights of God’s unbounded mercy. *Show me your glory!*

But what, at root, is the glory of God? If we, like Moses, were to request to see God’s glory, what would we in fact see at the heart?

What did Moses see? Interestingly, as this passage tells us, when Moses asks to see the glory of God, it was not so much what Moses saw, but what Moses *heard* (33:19):

And [the Lord] said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

What, then, is the glory of God? God’s glory is *all the Lord’s goodness*: the sum total of all of his moral attributes and excellencies. God’s glory is also his *name*: in particular, *the Lord – I AM*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “A View of God’s Glory,” p. 191.

*WHO I AM*, God's covenant name, God's personal name (see Exodus 3:14). And God's glory is ultimately this description of himself, this definition of himself: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

Now, this definition is what logicians call a tautology. A tautology is a linguistic redundancy. For example, "I like what I like." Or, "I'll be where I'm going to be." You say something, but you don't seem to be saying anything. Yet what you're doing is saying, in effect, "Back off. I will not be influenced by anyone outside myself. Thank you very much."

So, too, the Lord's self-description, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," sounds similarly like a tautology, a linguistic redundancy that doesn't really communicate anything. But, in actual fact, it communicates something supremely important about who God is, indeed, about God's glory: namely, that there are absolutely no external constraints upon God's choice of to whom he will show mercy. In other words, when it comes to being gracious or showing mercy, God is completely and entirely free. He is not bound by anyone or anything other than himself. He can therefore show grace to whomever he wants, and he can show mercy to whomever he wants.

Thus, it is the essence of God's character, the core of his goodness, the definition of his name, the heart of his glory, to reserve the right to be gracious to whomever he wants, and to show mercy to whomever he wants.

And this, friends, is the best news in the world for sinners! For there is nothing you can do, and there is nothing you can fail to do, to put constraints upon God's ability to be gracious to you and show you mercy. He is free—absolutely, completely free! And he can be gracious to whom he will, and show mercy to whom he will. So you have no excuse, regardless of where you've been or how far you've fallen, to think that God can't still be gracious and merciful to you.

He's free. This is his glory and his goodness and his name. This is what Moses came to understand more fully at the foot of Mount Sinai and in the face of great moral failure and national disaster. And this is what we must come to understand more fully in our own lives as well. For the sovereign grace and mercy of God is the only hope anyone has in the face of wilderness apostasy.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude this message with two words: a word of warning, and a word of hope.

First, a word of warning: Times of transition are dangerous times precisely because changing circumstances often introduce disappointment into our lives; and when disappointment is left unchecked, it can result in disillusionment; and when disillusionment festers, it can turn into doubt; and when doubt is full grown, it will express itself in idolatry and ultimately apostasy—outright rejection of the faith.

So recognize that there is a pattern to apostasy, and be on the look out for earlier warning signs in your own life or the lives of others. Be especially sensitive to the three realities that tend to create disappointment about the presence of God that can lead to disillusionment and beyond. First, unanswered prayers. Few things can cause more disillusionment in the people of God than unanswered prayers. Second, unexplained suffering. Suffering is hard, but

inexplicable or unexplainable suffering can be devastating to one's faith, as it has been for so many down through the ages. And, third, unmanaged disappointments. These can sometimes start off as little things, but then grow into much bigger things. Unmanaged disappointments can really undermine our confidence in God over the long haul.

On the flipside, take every advantage of the means of grace to combat the encroachment of disappointment and disillusionment. In particular, continue in prayer, seeking the Lord's face on a daily basis. Continue in public worship, gathering together with God's people to celebrate who God is and what he's done in Christ. And continue meeting together with one another. As Hebrews reminds us: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (3:12-13).

The second word is a word of hope. And it is based on two hope-giving realities. First, *the present intercession of the Son*. While Israel had Moses interceding on their behalf and, by the grace of God, sparing them being utterly destroyed because of their own rebellion, we have one greater than Moses who intercedes on our behalf. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us (7:22-25):

This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.<sup>23</sup> The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office,<sup>24</sup> but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Jesus Christ is our great high priest in the place of Moses, and he always lives to intercede for us, and so can save us to the uttermost. He never dies. He always lives. So he always prays for the sons and daughters of God.

The second hope-giving reality is *the sovereign grace of God*. Because God defines himself as the one who is gracious to whom he is gracious and the one who has mercy on whom he will have mercy, we can always go to him to receive grace and find mercy in time of need. Again, there are no constraints we can place upon God's grace and mercy. It doesn't matter how far you are from him this morning, or how far you've run from him in the past year, God is able to receive you again, anew, into his mercy, if you will turn to him in faith. As the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 3:

        'Return, faithless Israel,  
                declares the LORD.  
I will not look on you in anger,  
        for I am merciful,  
        declares the LORD;  
I will not be angry forever.  
13     Only acknowledge your guilt,  
                that you rebelled against the LORD your God  
                and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree,  
                and that you have not obeyed my voice,  
                declares the LORD.  
14     Return, O faithless children,  
                declares the LORD;  
                for I am your master;

I will take you, one from a city and two from a family,  
and I will bring you to Zion.