

THE GREAT INTERRUPTION - SIN IN THE CHURCH EXODUS 32

INTRODUCTION:

It has only been six weeks since Israel willingly entered into a covenant with the God of Abraham at Mt. Sinai. Following the institution of the Covenant God called Moses to rendezvous with Him on top of Mt. Sinai. For forty days Moses has been face to face with God receiving specific instruction for His people that wait at the foot of the mountain. These instructions are given to us in part in the section of Exodus that begins with chapter 20 and concludes in the middle of Chapter 31. It was a memorable moment in the life of the nation. Surely the people will be waiting at the foot of the mountain, tingling with anticipation of what it is going to mean in the days ahead to be the people of God.

Wrong! In less than six weeks after the establishment of the covenant between God and His people, His people are intentionally breaking covenant with Him. While Moses is on the mountain receiving instructions for the people, the people are turning toward idolatry. As God and Moses draw to the close of the revelation that Moses is to receive, God sends him down

from the mountain in haste. He informs Moses that the people have already erected an idol and are in the process of indulging themselves in the worship of that idol. There is sin in the midst of the people of God.

Dr. Bernard Ramm, who taught at Baylor University years ago, makes an observation in his little exposition of Exodus: "It tells of a terrible incongruity — like a murder in a cathedral during high mass or a rape at a wedding feast or goofing clowns at a funeral. Something occurs that is entirely out of place." That is an apt way to describe the tragedy of this great interruption of God's relationship with His people, Israel.

Unfortunately, this is not the only instance in which there has been sin among the people of God. There were many other occasions in the Old Testament where there was sin in the church. There are instances in the New Testament in which there was sin in the church. Most of the seven letters that went to those early churches in the Book of Revelation sound an urgent call for repentance because there is sin in the church. However, I don't know of a more gross expression of what it means to have sin in the church than this that occurred at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

We must take a careful look at this chapter. We must understand the dynamics of this event at the foot of the mountain. We do not want to be guilty in the 21st century of having this kind of gross violation of the Covenant with God in the midst of the people of God.

I. THE SIN OF THE REDEEMED.

This is the shocking thing about this whole incident. The people guilty of this sin are the redeemed. Some of them still bear in their garments the stains of the blood that was sprinkled on them when Moses confirmed the Covenant with God. Yet, the chapter opens, "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, makes us gods who will go before us." It was a congregational sin, a church sin! The people of God moved in rebellion as a company. Someone has suggested that since only three thousand died as a result of the judgment upon the sin, it might have been led by only a handful of people. But the record seems to be clear that it was a congregational sin.

1. A sin of ingratitude.

How soon people forget! These are the very people that God brought out of Egypt with a strong arm. These are the very people that He brought through the Red Sea on dry ground. These are the very people that He has given food and water to continuously as they marched to Mt. Sinai. These are the people to whom He spoke and revealed Himself at Mt. Sinai. But listen to what they say when Moses has been away for only about 40 days: "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to Him." "This fellow Moses?" Moses had been the leader but God was the redeemer. What happened at Mt. Sinai as they made the golden calf was a gross expression of ingratitude.

When ever you find sin in the church it is an expression of ingratitude. The church is made up of the redeemed, the people of God. Of all the citizens of this planet they are the ones that have reason for gratitude and loyalty to God. When ever they collectively sin against God they have expressed unkind ingratitude.

2. A sin of disobedience.

God had given them the ten words from the mountain that were to be the guiding principles for their national life. The second of those

commandments was that they were to make no graven images. Yet, when they come to Aaron with their complaint about the absence of Moses, Aaron receives from them their ear rings made of gold. Aaron puts these ear rings in the fire, melts the gold, and then molds it into the likeness of a calf, probably in the likeness of a young bull calf. When it is completed, he sets it up in front of the people and the people say, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Then Aaron set up an altar in front of the calf and announced that the next day they would hold a feast to the Lord. It probably did not start out to be idolatry. It probably was intended to be simply making a likeness of God. But as we learned from the study of the second commandment you cannot make a likeness of God without degrading your image of God. It was an attempt on the part of these wavering Israelites to bring God under their control and it was an act of deliberate disobedience to the commandment that God had given on the mountain. They knowingly and intentionally choose to make a graven image of God. The sins that take place in the life of the Church are usually sins of disobedience. The people of God who make up the church are the people to whom God has revealed His will. They rarely ever sin in ignorance. God has given them light and when they sin, they sin against, the light. This makes the sin all the more serious.

3. A sin of unbelief.

In spite of the stout words of commitment they had spoken to the Lord when He revealed Himself at the mountain, they were actually a people of very small faith. Even though they had seen the mighty, glorious displays of the power of God in their redemption from Egypt, their confidence in the Lord was still very small. Whenever their primary leader Moses is missing for only 40 days they conclude that the favor of God has been removed from them. They are a people of unbelief. They are choosing to walk by sight rather than by faith.

So often this is true when ever there is sin in the church. It grows out of a lack of a strong faith and a steadfast confidence in the Lord. It grows out of an adequate understanding of who God is and how God does what He does. Because of their unbelief, they rebel against the Lord in sin. Then, you have sin in the church.

4. A sin of indulgence.

When ever they set up the graven image they adopted the ways of the pagan world around them. The worship of idols was almost always accompanied

by some type of sensual indulgence. Moses simply reports that "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge themselves in revelry." The evidence seems to be that it was a drunken, sexual orgy. When Moses arrived at the camp it says, "Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing." It was a terribly embarrassing scene. The people of God are indulging themselves like the idolaters who live all around them in that Middle Eastern world. It is a sin of selfish, sensual indulgence.

This is true so often when you find sin in the church. Someone or a group within the church, sometimes the whole church, has chosen to indulge themselves in sensual pleasures that are offensive to the God of Abraham, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

II. THE FAILURE OF A LEADER.

Whenever there is sin in the church, there has usually been a leadership failure. Blame for what happened at the foot of the mountain cannot be laid at the feet of Moses. He was faithfully doing what God had instructed him to do. The blame must be laid at the feet of his brother, Aaron. He was left with delegated authority over the people while Moses was on the mountain. He had reason to know what was happening and where Moses was. But you

would not know that from his conversation with the people that day. Instead of standing as a barrier between them and sin, he actually became an enabler in the sin.

1. A failure of conviction.

Why did Aaron behave in the way he behaved? His convictions concerning the reality and person of God did not go deep enough. He did not understand deeply enough how offensive such an act would be before God. He saw himself as responsible to the people more than as responsible to God. Weak leaders are always a curse to the church. They will inevitably enable the church to sin against God. I speak these words with a sober awareness of their implications.

I never shall forget a statement made by one of my favorite professors in Seminary. Dr. David Garland came to Southwestern Seminary to take up the teaching of Old Testament, he left the pastorate of one of the stronger churches in Little Rock. When someone asked him why he would leave such a strong church to go to a Seminary professorship, he had an interesting answer. He said, "It was time for me to move. I had come to love the people so much that I could not stand to confront them and to rebuke them

anymore." This is always a danger for a spiritual leader. Whenever the spiritual leader comes to the place that he loves the people more than he loves the Lord, he loves the redeemed more than he loves the Redeemer, he is a threat to the people. He may easily become a weak and enabling leader.

2. A failure of courage.

There is no way to read this inspired record left to us by Moses without having bad feelings about Aaron. When Moses confronted Aaron about what had happened to the people while he was gone, he gave a weak answer. He said, "Do not be angry, my lord, you know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, "Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." So I told them, "Who ever had any gold jewelry take it off. Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" What a weak answer! He accepts no responsibility for what he has done. He puts the people in the worst light and himself in the best light. The truth was he did not raise a hand or speak a word to caution them about the error that they were committing. He did not restrain them from doing sin. The golden calf did not come out of the fire as it appeared before the people. Actually, Aaron had been involved in the molding of the calf out of

the gold of the fire. He was a weak leader and failed his people in a time of crisis.

I have a fear at this point. My fear is that I would be more like Aaron than Moses. I will confess there is in me a desire to please you. I do love you. But which is most important that I love the Lord or that you love me? It is important that the leader be more concerned that he not offend the Lord than that he not offend you.

III. THE WRATH OF THE REDEEMER.

How does God react to sin in the Church? He always acts in the same way. One writer on Exodus entitles this section "It is Hard to be God." Every parent, I think, can sense something of what the great heavenly Parent must have felt when He saw the people He had just redeemed and adopted as His own people turning their back upon Him in an ungrateful, unloving way at the foot of the mountain. The record is rather clear that God's first response was anger. In fact, God said to Moses, "Go down because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt."

1. The threat of destruction.

The first response of God to Moses concerning the sin in the church was a threat of destruction. He said to Moses, "I have seen these people and they are a stiff necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." The rightness of what God wanted to do cannot be debated. They have broken Covenant and they deserve destruction. But the reaction of Moses was to prostrate himself before the Lord in earnest intercessory prayer. We will come back to this next time and notice the intercessory role that Moses accepted in this terrible situation.

2. The extension of mercy.

After Moses had sought the favor of the Lord, the record reads, "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened." The word "relented" is translated in the old version, "repented." It means simply that God did not do what He had announced He was about to do. He changed the chosen course of action. Instead of raining up on the church complete destruction, He chose to extend mercy. This is such a word of encouragement. Thank God He deals with His people in mercy. He deals in mercy even when they deserve judgment. He still does this whenever He finds sin in the church.

IV. THE CONFRONTATION OF THE SIN

Even though God is a God of mercy, there still had to be a confrontation.

Time will not permit us to explore this in great detail, but it is described for us in this inspired text.

1. The confrontation with the sinner.

Moses becomes the voice of God to the people. He lays before the people the charge for what they have done. Moses stands before the people and cries out, "Who ever is for the Lord, come to me!" On that day the sons of Levi rallied around him. Moses instructed them to unsheathe their sword, to go in among their brethren, and to be in the instruction of judgment upon the sin in the church. On that day, three thousand Israelites died under the sword of the Levites. The sin had to be purged. The sin had to be confronted. This is the painful part of the process. Sin in the church cannot be ignored. You cannot go on as though nothing has happened. When the Church has sinned, God calls for confrontation that has as it's goal the purity of the church.

2. The confrontation with the Lord.

I will just suggest this at this time and will come back to it the next time.

Listen to these words of Moses: "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." As we read the record that follows, Moses did go up before the Lord on behalf of the people. There in the presence of the Lord he laid out his own life on behalf of the people. He pleads with God to show mercy and forgive or to blot his name out of the book of the living.

Whenever there is sin in the Church, there needs to be someone who loves the Church so much that they will lay down their life in intercessory prayer for the church.

When you look at the Church in America, the Church collectively, it is obvious there is sin in the church. You can find golden calves in the Church in America. The question is, "Do we have anyone who loves the Church enough to prostrate themselves before the Lord in intercessory prayer and to prevail in prayer until God shows mercy?"

I said of Aaron that there is a danger of loving the people more than you do the Lord, but there is another side to that truth — when you love the Lord

like you ought, then you will love His people enough to lay down your life for them. The people will never be what they ought to be to you until the Lord is what He ought to be to you.

It is a word that reminds us of what important it is to make sure that there are no idols in the church. I ask you, is there any thing or any one that means more to you than the Lord means to you? Is there anything or anyone to whom you look more than you look to the Lord? If there is, then we have an idol. We are the redeemed people of the living God and we must not have any other loyalties above Him.