

Conflict at the Calf

Exodus 32:15-35

Moses pleaded successfully with the Lord to spare the nation, but he still has to go down the mountain and confront the idolatry at the bottom. Faithfulness to God and His kingdom leads to conflict, which then in God's good time brings true peace.

Overview of the Text

The two stone tablets are inscribed on both sides with the Ten Commandments, God's own engraving (vv15-16). Joshua is halfway up the mountain, so he doesn't know what Moses does, only the sound of people shouting like the sound of war (v17). It's not the noise of victory or defeat, but the sound of music/debauchery (*anot*). This is a difficult word for a difficult sound, perhaps intentionally so (v18). At the bottom of the mountain they see the people dancing at the calf, which causes Moses to smash the tablets (v19). Where the covenant was made, it's now broken. Earlier Moses asked why Yahweh was angry (v11), but now it's his anger that burns. He takes the calf, burns it, grinds it to powder, and makes the children of Israel drink it (v20) He asks Aaron what the people did to him that would make him bring this sin upon them (v21). Aaron wants Moses not to get so angry, knowing how prone they are to evil (v22). Not seeing Moses, they wanted gods to go before them, so Aaron gathered golden earrings, cast them into the fire, and pow, out came this calf (vv23-24)! The people are still out of control, unrestrained, uncovered, and naked to their shame, so Moses gathers Levites to execute those engaged in idolatry (vv25-27). Three thousand fall and the hands of the Levites are filled, that is, they're ordained for service on account of their faithfulness (vv28-29). Moses pleads with God to blot out their sin, but if not, to take his life and blot him out of His book with them (vv30-32; cf. Ps. 69:28; Is. 4:3). The Lord says He will hold those who sinned responsible, and His angel will lead him (vv33-34). He plagues the people for what they did (v35).

Throw Down

God says the children of Israel quickly turned away, corrupted themselves, and are stiff-necked, and yet many are still surprised at Moses' harsh reaction. He smashes the tablets to expose what they have done. The word of God is not something to sit on the coffee table while being completely disregarded. It would be better to throw it away. Moses breaks the tablets because he cares about what's on them. Israel breaks God's law because they could care less. We live in a day when God's word and testimonies are routinely ignored in buildings with crosses on them. No one says anything for the sake "peace", but at the cost of purity. There's no peace when sin is left to grow and fester. If gross sin is winked at in the church, is it any wonder we have drag queen story time down at the local library? It's every Christian's job not be the frog in the boiling pot. You have to do something, say something, call out sin in such a way that addresses it, and this will mean conflict of some kind. Moses doesn't set the tablets down in a safe place and cover the golden calf so he can have a nice heart-to-heart with Aaron. People often choose not to say anything in order to preserve a good thing and the peace currently enjoyed. They also cover up abuse, dishonesty, immorality and much more to preserve their position, power, financial advantage, reputation and other perks. Sometimes you can't move the pot, so it's time to get out. Moses isn't the one who causes the trouble, but he has to deal with it: "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" (v21). It's Aaron who doesn't love Israel enough to speak the truth. Moses is acting, not reacting. He is self-sacrificial, self-controlled, and acting in the best interest of the Lord and his people. He confronts knowing that peace results from obedience.

NOTES

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Blame It On the Rain

Leaders bear the responsibility to protect and defend what is entrusted to them: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Tim. 6:20). This doesn’t mean they are always successful, but they must do their job even when it costs them to do so. The apostles were clueless during much of Jesus’ ministry, and yet He led, loved, and corrected them continually. Judas’ betrayal was not a failure on Christ’s part, but through His obedience and trust in the Father, His ultimate victory. Aaron never objects to Israel’s desire to fashion an idol (vv2, 24). He points out their evil bent and describes the calf popping out of the fire (vv22, 24). In an effort to make it sound better, he succeeds in making it sound ridiculously worse. Moses sees what is happening, and so he takes responsibility and action. Burning, grinding, and scattering the calf into water for Israel to drink is a jealously rite similar to the one given for married couple disputing unfaithfulness (Num. 5:11-31). The accused would take an oath of innocence, and the accusation written down and scraped into water. Then the accused would drink it and either get sick or not, revealing guilt or innocence. The point is that God holds His people accountable, and there is no sin that is hidden that will not come to light (Heb. 4:13). If leaders had to be perfect, we wouldn’t have any. But we should have leaders who are morally qualified and held accountable, as well as skilled. Problems in the family, church, organization, company, or nation are not necessarily the fault of the leaders, but it’s their responsibility to address those problems with courage and wisdom. Have you burned, grinded, scattered and drunk your idols?

Take Me

Moses succeeded in making the case for God not to wipe out the whole nation (vv11-14). Now he lays his own life on the line, asking the Lord to take him if He won’t forgive the people (vv31-32). God’s response makes a distinction: He won’t forgive the guilty, and neither will He let Moses die (vv33-34). This anticipates what he will say in chapter 34: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (vv6-7). Israel’s corporate guilt in idolatry could have justly led to their total extinction, but instead God chooses to hold some rebels accountable (v35). Perhaps these folks didn’t know Yahweh at all, although this isn’t necessarily the case. What is clear is that Moses loved his people in word and deed, even unto death. He is picture of Jesus Christ who wasn’t complicit in our sin at all, but died for them anyway. If God marked iniquities, Moses couldn’t stand. But Jesus was totally faithful and sinless, dying for us who have danced around all kinds of calves. The law came through Moses, but grace and truth through Jesus Christ. Three thousand died when the law came down the mountain, but when the Spirit was poured out, “those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41).