

## Prayer

We make ourselves available to You this day, Lord Jesus, to do Your will. We are ready to confront the powers of darkness and build up what is good and right, and to stand against untruth and injustice and work for all that is honest and right. Though we may be confused by all that happens around us, Lord Jesus, give us the courage to keep close to what we know of Your will and Your Word, and so be consistent in our faith and our deeds. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN.

---

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Liberty

*Throughout the world, people are being held in the iron grip of evils that are tolerated as 'culture'. Pray today for the many people throughout the world who are in desperate need of health care.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those detained in Iran for political reasons alone.*
  - *Pray for wisdom for Christians who work in environmental sciences*
  - *Give thanks to God for His Word and the revelation of His will*
- 

## Meditation

The Glory of the Father is there for us all to see.

We know about Him from the life of His Son, Jesus Christ  
We hear about Him through the testimony of the apostles;  
We discover Him within the world revealed all around us;  
We read about Him in the Bible and the history of the Church;  
We observe Him in the lives of great people of previous ages;  
We experience Him in daily life, by the power of the Holy Spirit  
We appreciate Him in the healing of our sins and our wounds;  
We feel Him in His powerful touch upon every part of our lives;  
We honour Him by giving Him our lives to be used for His glory.

And one day we will be with Him in His Glory!

---

## Bible Study - Exodus 32:15-24

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two Tablets of the Testimony in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, on the front and on the back.

<sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

<sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the racket of the people as they celebrated, he said to Moses, 'There is a noise of fighting in the camp.' <sup>18</sup> But Moses said, 'It is not a song of victory, or the shouts of losers, but the noise of revellers that I hear!' <sup>19</sup> As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became ferociously angry, and he threw down the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it. <sup>21</sup> Moses said to Aaron, 'What did these people do to you that you have led them into this great sin?' <sup>22</sup> And Aaron said, 'My lord, do not become too angry; you know that these people are set on evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, "Make us gods who will go before us; as for this man Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." <sup>24</sup> So I said to them, "Whoever has gold, take it off"; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"'

## Review

This is a dramatic moment in the Old Testament; in anger, Moses smashed the precious stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments written by God, on the ground. We are hardly surprised, because the people of Israel with whom God was preparing to dwell (chps. 25-31) were worshipping a golden calf and holding a feast in its honour at the recommendation of Aaron, Moses' brother (32:5,6)! The terrible contrast between sordid human sin and divine graciousness is captured in the smashing of the stone tablets, carried out in the heat of Moses' wrath (32:19), and followed by his furious punishment of the people (32:20) and a strained confrontation with Aaron (32:22-24).

So now we think we know what happened; however, the Bible directs us masterfully to what God wants to know. Yes, the people built a golden calf and worshipped it, and Moses broke the Ten Commandments in fury, but the story is told in order to demonstrate that God is in control, and His covenant with His people will never be overturned, whatever the human sin. By the time we reach the end of this most terrible event (34:35), God had not dismissed Israel or Moses, and their relationship had been restored as God revealed Himself from Sinai in His 'Shekinah' glory. This glory famously enlightened Moses' face, as he summoned the people to receive God's further commands (34:27-35)! This tell us that God cannot be 'trumped' by human sin; even the worst sin of idolatry committed by His own people!

Before we read this reading, we already know the general story of what was happening (32:1-6), and that God had told Moses to return because of this. We already know that God and Moses had already discussed what to do with Israel and her dreadful sin (32:7-14). So what is new in this passage? Firstly, Joshua joined Moses as he came down the mountain (32:17), because he had come with Moses when he went up, and presumably waited (24:13). Joshua was Moses' chosen heir and Israel's future leader, so throughout the ups and downs of the Exodus experience, God protected him through keeping him close to Moses.

Secondly, having argued on behalf of the people when God became angry with them (32:7-10), Moses became angry when he saw for himself what God could already see (ref. 32:10, and 19). He smashed these incredibly important stone tablets (32:15,16). It is possible that Moses broke the stones to symbolise the break between God and His people, but the emphasis on Moses' anger (32:19) suggests more than this. In his actions, Moses showed the people what God felt.

Thirdly, Moses destroyed the calf. The story line is peculiar here, because Moses broke and ground to powder a cast golden idol, so this was either a miraculous and symbolic destruction of evil, or an over-exaggerated description of fury! We just do not know enough about the object or the Hebrew words here to say more! However, all evil and sin had to be destroyed and 'blotted out' from Israel.

Lastly, the pathetic excuse given by Aaron seems laughable; he was only doing what the people wanted (32:23). But surely, was Aaron not culpable as leader? We will discover God's opinion about all this tomorrow, but we would be indulging in a modern desire to apportion blame if we follow this line of thinking. The confrontation between Moses and Aaron was inevitable, and I suspect that even as Aaron said these words he knew how pathetic they were.

Nevertheless, throughout the whole dreadful episode, God was in control. By keeping Joshua free from sin He protected the future, those responsible would have to face their stupidity and pay a price (as we will see tomorrow), but the evil had to be removed from Israel. If we imagine that God acts against sin amongst His people in any other way, even today, then I suggest we may be mistaken. He protects the future by dealing with today's problems; but we need to co-operate with Him and understand what he is doing and why.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What did Moses and Joshua hear as they came down the mountain?
- Why did Moses break the stones?
- How was the calf destroyed?
- What does the conversation between Moses and Aaron reveal?

### **Notes on the text and translation**

**V17 'as they celebrated'** *The Hebrew word 'celebrated' is rare, and it is related to the word for 'shouting' (as most versions translate). However, it seems to mean shouting for a reason, and in this case, we know that the shouting is to do with celebrating a feast (32:5). For this reason, I have translated it as the noise of celebrating.*

**V18 'but Moses said ...'** *The text does not say 'Moses', but the logic of the Hebrew at this point suggests that Moses replies; hence my translation.*

**V18 'It is not a song of victory, or the shouts of losers; I hear the noise of revellers!'** *This famous verse contains three repeated sentences with one Hebrew word for 'sound' ('kol'). Throughout the Old*

*Testament, this word means many different things according to the setting, and this is why I have translated it in this way.*

**V19** *'he became ferociously angry'* The Hebrew says 'his anger burned hot'. This is clearly a typical Hebrew colloquialism, for which a better translation is 'ferociously angry' or some similar phrase used to indicate the same today.

**V21** *'that you have led them into this great sin?'* The Hebrew is awkward to translate, and many translations have 'that you have brought so great a sin on them.' However, the form of the Hebrew verb suggests strongly that Aaron was culpable in the whole matter, and the translation I have given offers this emphasis.

---

## Going Deeper

### **What did Moses and Joshua hear as they came down the mountain?**

Moses and Joshua met up as Moses came down the mountain, and whereas Moses knew what he was coming down to do, Joshua did not. Clearly, he heard something from a distance that was not normal; it was louder than the sound of the people going about their daily business, and this is what is strongly implied by verse 17.

Moses' reply is fascinating, and if you read it in Hebrew, it is clearly a poem with one stanza and three short lines. One commentary on Exodus (the Word Commentary by John Durham) presents the poem in this way, which is close to the Hebrew. It helps us understand the text:

'Not the sound of heroes exulting,  
Not the sound of losers lamenting;  
The sound of random singing is what I hear!'

There is a great deal of debate about whether the last line of this refers to singing or not, but there is a consensus amongst scholars who have studied this verse that it refers to the raucous sound of revelry, with suggestions of sexual excess and perhaps drunken singing. The poem itself and the last line are the first indication we have that Moses had begun to hear for himself what God had told him. It must have been hard for Moses to believe that the people of Israel had become so bad that they had made a golden calf and begun to worship it (32:8), but now the reality of what was happening was beginning to sink in, and the poem expresses distinct distaste and disgust. The cry of victory over an enemy would have been helpful, and God would have responded to a cry for help if His people were in need; but as it was, they were having a drunken orgy.

### **Why did Moses break the stones?**

Who would not be incredibly angry at this point? We can understand that Moses would have been extremely angry at what was happening, but we should be cautious. All the indications are that Moses, having been forewarned by God about what was happening, was in control of his anger, and what he did in breaking the stone tablets was a control expression not so much of his own anger, but the truth of what had happened between Israel and God.

There were four materials available to people of those days for making records. Writing could be done on papyrus, a paper like material made by pressing papyrus grass. A more durable and plentiful writing surface was leather, though leather had many other uses. The third material was clay tablets, used extensively in royal records, and the fourth and most durable material was stone. Stones required carving, and was used for the most significant and formal records, and its use here indicated that this was a foundational document for the people of Israel. Two tablets were written, and if what we know of ancient times holds true for this story, then one stone would have been a copy of the other, one was 'God's copy' and the other was the copy that belonged to the people. Of course, the intention was that the two of them (25:16) would be placed together in the Ark, to symbolise the dwelling of God with His people.

Moses was clearly angry, and the text makes a great deal of this, but by breaking the stones, Moses graphically demonstrated that the Covenant between God and His people had been broken. Neither stone was spared; the people had broken themselves from God, and God was 'broken' by His people's rejection. Moreover, Moses broke the stones 'at the foot of the mountain', where previously the people had worshipped the Lord (see Deuteronomy 4:11 and Exodus 19:17). The revelry of the people was supposed to be a form of celebratory worship to the Lord as represented by the idol of the calf (see 32:5,6), but instead, their worship had become an offence to God that broke the Covenant.

### **How was the calf destroyed?**

It seems odd that the Bible describes Moses as dealing with the situation by burning the idol, grinding it to a powder and then scattering it on water (32:20). There is symbolism involved in making the Israelites 'drink it' (32:20), but for the moment, we will look at the method of destroying the idol.

From what we know (32:1-4), the idol was made by using a large number of gifts of gold jewellery given to Aaron. The exact manufacture is a little obscure in 32:4, but many people think that the idol was in fact made of wood, and had parts of it cast from gold and had gold plating all around. It would of course be possible to burn the wood from such an object and grind it into small pieces, but it seems odd to speak of managing to do this with gold. This could only be returned to a fine powder suitable for sprinkling in a stream if it was down with flint (the ancients did not possess files for filing!). It appears that Moses threw the remains of the idol into some stream or wadi used by the Israelites for drinking, so that in some symbolic way, they 'consumed' the idol, and once it had passed through them, the material from which it was made became a desecration, and 'unclean'.

There is considerable evidence from elsewhere in the Old Testament that what Moses did here was copied in later times as an example of how to dispose of a pagan deity from Israel. In 2 Kings 23, Josiah instituted reforms in Israel and removed images and idols from the Temple. Scripture records that he 'burned' the idols, 'beat them into dust' and then 'threw the dust of them upon the graves of the common people' (2 Kings 23:6f.). There is also some evidence of this 'formula' being used elsewhere in Moses' day, but the dating of such material is notoriously unreliable, and it is safer to think that this passage is the primary example of evicting idols in Israel.

### ***What does the conversation between Moses and Aaron reveal?***

The conversation between Aaron and Moses is terse and revealing, and Moses confronts his brother immediately. From his perspective, something must have happened to Aaron for him to act in such a way, 'what did these people do to you ...?' he asked (32:21). Aaron's reply is typically defensive, and he must have known that he would have to reply to Moses at some point and explain what had happened. He appealed to Moses not to become angry, but accept that 'these people are set on evil ...' (32:22). It was a typical 'its not my fault its theirs' reply from Aaron, but Moses was having none of it.

The rest of this passage gives us Aaron's explanation of what the people did, and it is fairly truthful. Today, people easily mock the words of Aaron at the end, for when speaking about the calf he had gathered, he said, 'I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!' (32:24). It sounds purely comical to us. However, there is something we should consider here. In ancient times, some people believed that idols were not in fact 'made by human hands', a phrase which itself comes from the Bible's criticism of idols. People believed that the gods were indeed more powerful than people, and that the idols evolved out of the work done by people, despite their artistic abilities and not because of them. Aaron's words do in fact represent how people of those days believed that idols were made.

The very fact that Aaron expressed this pagan belief was an insult to God Himself, and it is possible that this triggered what happened next, but we will have to read on to see what this is and why it came to have a defining effect on the tribes of Israel.

## **Application**

One thing that seems to be very clear within this passage, which is that God was in control of what was happening, far more than we imagine. The story seems to present Moses as destroying the highly valuable Covenant of God (as represented by the stone Tablets) in a fit of rage, but it seems more likely that Moses was acting in a highly controlled way, demonstrating to the people the anger of God shown him already (32:7-10). Moses himself remained the one who stood between the people and God, representing God to the people and willing to represent the people to God. However, at this moment, his anger was a reflection of God's anger, and this is also represented in the way that Moses dealt with disposing of the golden calf.

It is not unheard of for people to become very upset when they talk about church matters, and indeed, most people who have had anything to do with religious societies or organisations will say that you have to be a highly tolerant person to survive them. People certainly feel things very deeply when it comes close to their faith, and so they should. The important question we must ask is whether the anger we feel is a holy anger or a selfish anger; and if it is righteous before God, should it be expressed or not. Psychology tells us that people have trouble with unexpressed anger and rage, but it cannot help to express this inappropriately or in a way that will not achieve a resolution to the original problem.

In this passage, Moses demonstrates the skill involved in expressing God's holy anger, by demonstrating the breaking of the covenant and making the people face the consequences of what they had done. However, we should add that if Moses possessed any personal anger, he was wise to control it and not express it, but what he did by controlling his anger is a lesson to us all. If our own anger is righteous and justified before God, then we should be able to control these feelings and use them according to God's purposes and design, as Moses did. The control of anger is important. Too many Christians live in a world of believing

that anger has no place in Christian life, and perhaps it should not. However, whilst we live in this world, we need to be able to exercise control over our emotions so that God can use them. If we do not let God use them, then Satan will quickly step in and seek to use anger and any other uncontrolled emotions to achieve his ends, rather than God's.

---

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. How do we break our Covenant with God today? What does God do about this, and what can we do about this?
2. When we repent of sin, what else do we need to do if we are to show that we have truly turned away from sin?
3. What does anger do to people? Discuss how to deal with anger when it is expressed, even if it is justified.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Some of the issues raised within this passage are important. We are reminded that there are always consequences to actions and we should accept that God will need to bring His judgement to bear on sin especially when committed by His people, for only then will they know that they have truly offended God. Today, we have developed a great ability to say that few things are bad enough to be called sins, and we have consequently reached a point where few people expect God to act in judgement about wrongdoing. Such short-sightedness will not help us, for we may fail to recognise when God comes amongst us, or why.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think about any recent times when you have been angry about something that has happened to you concerning your faith or the life of the church. All of us can get quite upset about such things. Pray and ask the Lord to help you discern whether your feelings were right or wrong, and whether they reflect something that needs to be pursued, or left alone.*
- *Pray for the Lord to come in judgement to sort out what is sinful in the life of the church today. Pray that He will do this work through His faithful people, so that we may know who is His, and who are the false prophets of our age.*

---

## Final Prayer

Lead me, Lord Jesus, through the days ahead. When I do not know what to do, guide me by a word; when I do not know where to go, guide me by your hand; when I do not know what to say, speak tenderly to me I pray. Lead me, Lord Jesus, for alone You are my guide. AMEN

---