

Prayer

Jesus Christ, You are our rock when life surprises us and challenges us, and we do not know where to go or what to do. Bless us as we turn to you for guidance, and by grace and love, lead us in the right direction according to the Father's will. Reveal again what You have called us to do with our lives, so that we may have confidence in each step we take, and live to Your praise and glory: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Liberty

Pray today for people whose voice is not heard by those who claim to govern them, for example in North Korea, Tibet, Iran, and Zimbabwe. Pray for Christians who promote peaceful change.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the joys and benefits of true liberty
 - Pray for those detained in Iran for political reasons alone.
 - Pray for wisdom for Christians who work in environmental sciences
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Meditation

Open the doors, Holy Spirit, to complete your work:

Of greater grace and endless favour,
Of costly salvation and perfect freedom,
Of full redemption and harmonious peace,
And of total deliverance and complete victory.

Open the doors, Holy Spirit, to full discipleship:

To gracious living and kindly action,
To truthful friendship and godly love,
To honest endeavour and heartfelt zeal,
And to devoted worship and service.

Close the doors, Holy Spirit, to the powers of evil:

So that good may prevail and sin be destroyed,
So that the paths of peace be kept from wickedness,
So that love may triumph over greed and malice,
And so that Satan may have no means to enter.

Bible Study - Exodus 32:25-35

²⁵ When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the disgust of those who might oppose them), ²⁶ Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!' And all the Levites gathered around him. ²⁷ He said to them, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says, "Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each one killing your brother, your friend, and your neighbour."' ²⁸ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people perished on that day. ²⁹ Then Moses said, 'You have set yourselves apart today for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of a son or a brother; you have given a blessing to yourselves this day.'

³⁰ On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You have committed a great sin. But I will now go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.' ³¹ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'I beg you, this people has committed a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, please forgive their sin; but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.' ³³ But the LORD said to Moses, 'I will only blot out of my book

whoever has sinned against me. ³⁴ Now go, and lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; and look, my angel will go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.' ³⁵ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people because they were responsible for the calf-- the one that Aaron made.

Review

A battle royal was raging for the soul of Israel, and our passage today describes its heart. It is easy to read about Aaron's sin of making of the golden calf and condemn it (32:1f.), or to read about Moses' calls to God to be lenient and admire his leadership (32:11f. and 33), or to try and make sense of the deep anger aroused by the whole incident in Exodus 32 (32:15-24). It is not easy to read today about how God had to wage war against evil so that sin was destroyed within His people. Most people would happily suggest that they gain the spiritual insights of Exodus 32 from the rest of chapter, but not this passage. For most, slaughter at God's command is simply unacceptable.

However, this is God's book and not ours; and the fact is that this passage describes what God had to do to rid His people of a pernicious evil that stood in the way of His work in the world. We should never forget that the reason for everything we read in the Bible is God's intention to bring salvation into the world, initially through His chosen people Israel. At this formative point in Israel's life, toleration of idolatry and compromise on the first two commandments would have been wholly destructive of God's relationship with Israel. Would Israel have a Tabernacle in which some Israelites would meet their God, with a golden calf at the other end of the camp for people who wanted to indulge in debauchery?

In later years, God's people evolved practices rather similar to this. As the writer of Kings records with dismay, when the northern tribes of Israel split from Judah, their king Jeroboam built two 'golden calves' for the people to worship, one at Bethel, and the other at Dan (1 Kings 12: 26-33). The tides of sin that washed over Israel did not go away, but Moses stood firm by God's authority, and our passage is the story of how that sin was dealt with. As Christians, we can only give thanks to God that Jesus has died for us so that no more death is required to atone for our sins.

By giving the people their golden calf, Aaron had given the people permission to do whatever they wanted, and they did just this; you may recall that the words used elsewhere in this chapter suggest sexual excess as well as partying and general revelry (32:6,18,25). Once discipline had been lost, the people were uncontrollable (32:25 - for full explanation, see 'going deeper'), so Moses was unable to regain control of the people or address them. He stood at one of the gates of Israel's camp and issued a challenge to those who were 'for the Lord' to join him, and members of his own tribe of Levi responded. Moses gave them instructions to slaughter their fellow Israelites, a terrible act for extreme times. The record tells us that 3,000 people died that day before Moses regained control of the people (32:30f.). Yet by this one act of faithfulness, the tribe of Levi was set aside in Israel forever 'for the service of the Lord' (32:29); Aaron was a Levite, and we already know that God had special plans to make the descendants of Aaron His priests (27:21), but here, the whole tribe is separated for priestly service (see also Numbers 3:6f.)

Moses then sought to atone for the people's sins, for despite the killing, the sin remained as an affront to God. Moses urged the Lord to forgive, and he even asked to be removed from God's 'book' (32:32) if God would not otherwise do this. However, all the Lord would say was that He wanted Moses to continue the journey to the Promised Land (32:34); and in addition, the formal punishment for the people's sin was a plague (32:35).

This is a torrid story, because sin always has dire consequences. It is far better to let the Lord deal with sin so that through His wrath we might have life, than stand with an enemy who will lead us, however subtly, towards eternal death.

Going Deeper

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

- What did the slaughter of the Israelites achieve?
- What is the significance of the setting apart of Levi?
- How and why did Moses seek atonement for the sins of the people?
- Why did God tell Moses to proceed to the Promised Land?

Notes on the text and translation

V25 *'to the disgust of those who might oppose them'* Most Bible versions say 'to the derision of their enemies'. However, the Hebrew does not use the usual word for 'enemies' here, but a version of a

common word meaning 'rise up against'. It is perfectly possible that what the original authors had in mind was the derision or disgust of any who might attempt to bring the people under control. This would make far more sense in the context of the story (see study).

V26 'then Moses stood in the gate of the camp' This is not the same as the NIV which says 'so he stood in the entrance of the camp', presumably because they reckoned that a nomadic camp in the desert could not have 'gates'. However, the word and term 'gates' means far more than a structure and is used of the camp of Israel in a number of places. The word 'gates' was associated with the place where the elders of the city gathered to pronounce judgements and act for justice, which is what Moses does here.

V30 'I beg you; this people has committed a great sin ...' The beginning of this sentence is often translated 'alas', or 'Oh'. However, the Hebrew word is a form of entreaty, so because we do not use these words today, I have used the expression 'I beg you ...'. This seems to me to be the closest we will get to the meaning of the sentence in modern English.

Going Deeper

What did the slaughter of the Israelites achieve?

The slaughter of the Israelites achieved several things, but primarily, Moses was able to exert authority over the people once again. In the first verse of our passage, many Bible translations suggest that people ran wild to the 'derision of their enemies', but if you read the notes I have made above on the translation, you will see that it is likely that the verse indicates no more than that Israel had become uncontrollable. It is rather farfetched to suggest that there were enemies around Israel seeking to take advantage, because there is no hint of this in the rest of this part of scripture. However, the issue of the control of Israel was all important.

Moses was the one who had to 'oppose' the Israelites (32:25) in order to establish order, and it was Moses who was disgusted at the sight of their running wild in the camp. He did this by standing at the 'gate' of the camp, a word that indicates the place of authority within any gathering of people, where traditionally, the elders of the people gathered to deal with judicial cases (18:21, etc.). Moses then called people to his side to stand with the Lord and follow his instructions, and it is not surprising that people from his own tribe came to his side, though it is by no means certain that all the Levites came.

The tactic of random slaughter was not the only instance of its kind in the Old Testament. Numbers 25 describes an incident at Peor in which Israelites had gone to sacrifice to other gods, and the revelry that accompanied this was more explicitly sexual in nature (Num 25:1,6-8). On that occasion, the action of one man, 'Phineas', who slaughtered a man and a woman, was sufficient to allay the wrath of God concerning the sin.

One feature of this event has captured the imagination of Christian writers and thinkers during the ages, and this is the rallying call, 'whoever is for the Lord, come to me'. This is echoed in the famous hymn 'Who is on the Lord's side ...' for example, and other Christian calls to come together to fight evil in spiritual warfare. The passage reminds us that spiritual warfare often begins within the church. The most pernicious evils that prevent God's Word being proclaimed are to be found within the church, and they need to be dealt with in spiritual warfare before the people of God can go on to offer their witness to the world.

What is the significance of the setting apart of Levi?

There are many references to the Levites as being the priests of Israel throughout the Old Testament, and they were not numbered within Israel because of their priestly status (Num 1:49). Indeed, when the Israelites left Sinai and began their wanderings, they were assigned the tasks of carrying the many parts of the Tabernacle in procession (Numbers 3:17f.) It is easiest if we think of Aaron and his family as being the High Priest (and his descendants), and the Levites as being general purpose priests, gathered under the famous names of Levi's sons, Gershom, Kohath and Merari (see Num 3:17 etc.).

In order to make up for the setting aside of the tribe of Levi, many lists of the tribes of Israel found in the Old Testament do not include Levi, but split the tribe of Joseph into two; being Manasseh and Ephraim. This meant, for example, that when the Levites carried the Tabernacle in the centre of the camp, the Old Testament still lists it as surrounded by three tribes to each of the north, south, east and west of the camp.

In the New Testament, we sometimes read about Levites and Priests as if they were two separate classes of people. By Jesus' day, the remnants of the tribe of Levi were largely poor people, because Levites did not receive an inheritance within Israel (Deut 10:9f.), but Priests were associated with the High Priestly family descended from Aaron.

How and why did Moses seek atonement for the sins of the people?

This passage continues to make a strong connection between sin and atonement. Moses had just been told the elaborate means of atonement for sin that would be in place when the Tabernacle was built and the priesthood established. Of course, this was not yet done, but knowing that this was what God wanted, Moses asked the Lord about how to achieve atonement for the people of Israel in the circumstances in which he found himself (32:30).

It is interesting to see that Moses appears to have offered himself as an atonement for the people. In verse 32, the Hebrew of the text is a little obscure, but the general idea is that Moses asked the Lord to forgive the people unilaterally, as he had already done (32:11-14). However, the verse continues by saying 'if not, then blot me out of the book you have written'. This suggests that Moses was willing to be cut off from God, surely a fate worse than death as far as an Israelite was concerned; so it is not impossible to think that Moses was offering his own life for that of the Israelites. God did not accept this, of course, because the time had not yet come for 'one man to die for the people' as the Messiah would do one day. However this is what Moses was willing to do for the people he led, and his is an example of true godly leadership.

The book of life mentioned in verse 32 is one of a few rare but significant places in scripture where there is reference to a special book kept by God with the names of His special people. Other references are found in Psalm 69:28, Isaiah 4:3 and Ezekiel 13:9. We know little of what people believed about this book, but it was clearly a significant part of ancient belief, and carried over into the New Testament, where it crops up as the 'Book of Life' in Revelation (Rev 3:5, 13:8, 20:12f.).

Why did God tell Moses to proceed to the Promised Land?

At first reading, it is not certain what God means by telling Moses to lead the people 'to a place about which I have spoken to you' (32:34). However, there is one place in Exodus 12:25, in the midst of the instructions about the Passover festival, where there is a reference to 'the land that the Lord will give you, as He has promised'. Throughout the book of Exodus, we do not hear of the final destiny of God's people in Canaan except in our passage here and this earlier passage. This is strange, given that we know the final destiny because of our knowledge of Genesis and the later story of Israel.

Nevertheless, the reference to the angel of the Lord leading the way (32:34) is sufficient to confirm that the Lord meant that Moses should lead the people on to Canaan. Furthermore, the impression is given that in the midst of the troubles described in this passage, one of the ways that God wanted the people to deal with the sins that had been committed was to move on. The people would receive their punishment in the form of a plague at some time, but part of the solution would be to get on with doing what God wanted.

Application

Everyone will have opinions about death and war, and what it means. I find it as difficult as anyone to read that God told His own people to put on the sword to fight for what was right, however, we must realise that in such times before Christ had died for our sins, this is what God had to do to regain control of His people. I have to accept that God used the methods and means of people of ancient times to speak to them, just as He has used methods and means appropriate to our own times to speak to us now.

This passage still begs the question whether God is somehow involved in the various acts of war that we witness in our world, and whether we can say that justice and God's eternal purposes are served when people take up arms against others even today. People of a past generation will easily say that during the second world war they fought an evil (Nazi control) that had to be stopped in its tracks for the sake of the world, but we seem to be unable to make similar judgements today. Personally, I find the repression of woman by many states under the name of Islam as repulsive as anything I have ever come across in world history, and I feel the same about the evil of so-called 'secularism' that suggests that everyone is free, but actively prevents many from expressing faith. Evils abound in our world, and although few of us will be sure about how they may be dealt with, there can be no doubt that people suffer and some die through the ignorance and violence associated with some of these evils.

The starting point of all Christians is our faith in Christ, and our faith in His death for the sake of all. For this reason, we can now say for certain that God does not require any more people to die because of sin; but how many will die because evils in this world go unabated until challenged, and how can we challenge them? A passage of scripture such as this reminds us that allowing people to do what they want is not a route to peace, as some would have us believe; indeed, there will be little further peace until people find atonement for their sins in Jesus Christ. As world tensions rise for all the reasons we read about in newspapers and hear about in the media, how will God's people respond to what is happening? Will we be impotent because of our divisions? Or will God raise up for us a Moses who will command the attention of all through decisive action? We do not know how God will work, but He will, because it breaks His heart to see so many people in the church and the world running amok according to their own desires, just as Israel did at the foot of Sinai.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss those things you find difficult in this passage of scripture, and how you deal with them as Christians.
2. How does God deal with sin amongst His people today? Can you give any examples to back up your ideas?
3. God instructs Moses to continue the journey to the Promised Land; what is the equivalent instruction for God's people today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it hard to try and explain this passage of scripture without saying to people that we who live in the western world have an easy life and we cannot allow this to determine our understanding of God's Word. What is written here describes the raw experience of humanity from which we have been protected to a large extent by our history and our culture, but it does not take too much to see that war and death are never far away from the real world in which we live. War today is infinitely more brutal than it was in ages past, and we need to be more circumspect in judging the Old Testament when it speaks of God being involved in war, when we so casually deploy weapons that can wipe out the entire world at the press of a button.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you made a stand for God in the midst of a difficult situation, perhaps a life and death situation? Think about what this has meant, and how the Lord has led you since this has happened. Have things been different or the same ever since? How have they been different?*
- *Pray for those who face a decision about whether to accept the Lord's discipline or go their own way. Such people do not advertise their dilemma. They tend to attempt to work their way through these situations by themselves, but pray for them nevertheless.*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for all Your work throughout history to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to us. Thank you for the evangelists, preachers, parents and teachers of past generations who have passed on the Good News, so that we may hear and benefit from Your work of Salvation now. Make us worthy of their efforts. AMEN
