

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I worship You
I am sorry for making a mess of my life
I am sorry for making a mess of other people's lives
Forgive me for thinking about myself when I should have loved others
Change my heart so that I enjoy helping other people
Change me so I am less obsessed with self
Make me more like You
AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Liberty

Pray for the liberty and freedom of children, especially those whose lives are blighted by work and poverty and who are unable to learn and grow in the family and the community.

On-going prayers

- *Pray against the evils that are oppressing humanity today*
- *Give thanks to God for the joys and benefits of true liberty*
- *Pray for those detained in Iran for political reasons alone*

Meditation

May you be happy to walk with the Lord in peace
and take delight in doing what is right in His eyes.

May you treasure His Word forever within your heart
and cease to sin because you have learned His laws.

May you open your eyes to perceive God's commands
and live to be obedient to the One who has saved you.

May you cling to the Lord who loves everything about you
and meditate on the wondrous things He has done for you.

May you put far away from you the perilous paths of evil
and chose to be taught by the ageless truths of Scripture.

May you live in the righteousness and faithfulness of God
and be one who is known by the steadfastness of your faith.

Bible Study - Exodus 33:1-11

¹ The LORD said to Moses, 'Get up and leave this place, you and the people you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land I promised by an oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants." ² I will send an angel before you, and drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, for I might destroy you on the way, because you are a stiff-necked people.'

⁴ When the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one wore ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "You are a stiff-necked people; if I were to go among you, even for a single moment, I would destroy you. Now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do to you."' ⁶ So from Mount Horeb onward, the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments.

⁷ Now Moses used to take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance from the camp. He called it the Tent of Meeting, and anyone who sought the LORD would go out to the Tent of Meeting, outside the camp. ⁸ So it was that whenever Moses went out to the Tent, all the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of their own tents, and they would

watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, they would stand up and then bow down in worship, each of them at the entrance of their own tent. ¹¹ In this way, the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

Review

This passage of Exodus is little known and little used, but it is significant. After the appalling incident of the golden calf and the awful consequences of that sin (32:25-35), God clearly wanted the people of Israel to move on and fulfil their destiny of leaving Sinai and taking the Promised Land. The first paragraph of this reading contains the Lord's clear instruction to Moses to get the people moving (33:1-3). However, the people did not move; they were mortified at the Lord's rebuke, as if in a state of shock after what had happened (33:4-6). The picture we are given is of a people who knew they needed to have the presence of their God with them but were heartbroken about their sin and its consequences. With God demanding action and the people unable to do anything except watch Moses and worship God from a distance (33:7-11), the passage describes something of an impasse.

As we read, we begin to wonder what might happen to the plans God revealed to Moses while he was on the mountain (Exodus 25-31). If the people had sinned so badly that God refused to travel with them to Canaan (33:3,5), what would be the point of making a Tabernacle Tent and appointing a priesthood? Surely, the vision just given to Moses was the epitome of 'God with His people' in Old Testament times! In addition, the last part of our passage describes Moses pitching a 'Tent of Meeting' outside the Israel's camp, so what would be the point of building a better one if God said He would not accompany the people? And why appoint Aaron as High Priest so shortly after he had been instrumental in building a golden calf!

The general picture we have of Israel's later journey through the wilderness is that God did indeed travel with them, in the midst of the camp, and after the Tabernacle was made (Exodus 35-40, and see Numbers 3), so what is going on here in this passage? Did God issue a threat that He did not carry out? The truth is that our passage describes those tense days after the conflict caused by the golden calf (Exodus 32), and we will discover in the rest of chapter 33 that Moses begged the Lord to revoke the threat of not travelling 'in the midst' of His people. Indeed, he submitted himself to God in powerful prayer and intercession to secure just this (33:12-23), and as we will read tomorrow, the Lord did change His mind (33:17). We might be tempted to think that God was playing tricks with His people by issuing threats and then revoking them. However, He needed to know that Israel genuinely repented of their sin, even though they were stubborn, a 'stiff-necked people' (33:3,5), and He needed Moses to give the great example of priestly intercession by which he led the people through these most difficult of times. These are examples from which we can learn.

After we have been in a dispute, most of us know that the following hours and days can feel exceptionally difficult. We know we have to move on, but feel we cannot, and what we feel is often shown in what we do, and sometimes in how we behave. Something similar was happening here in this passage; the first paragraph tells us the stance of God, the injured party, standing firm against sin and asking everyone to move on. The second paragraph describes the people, paralysed with remorse. The third paragraph gives us a fascinating insight into the priestly life and ministry of Moses before the Tabernacle was built, as he prepared to intercede for the people to lift God's ban. All three would have to work together in the coming days to enable the journey to the Promised Land to proceed.

The truth was that God wanted to move on, the people wanted to repent and Moses was waiting for the right time to intercede. As in real life, although what had happened was very difficult, it was not the end of the world!

Going Deeper

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

- Why did God pick this moment to speak about going to the Promised Land (33:1-3)?
- Why did the Israelites strip off their ornaments (33:4-6)?
- What was the purpose of the 'Tent of Meeting' (33:7-11)?

Notes on the text and translation

V1 *'to the land I promised by an oath ...'* The Hebrew text says 'to the land I swore to ...' However, we do not use the idea of swearing an oath in the same way today, so I have expanded the words a little

to make the meaning of the text clear. We know from scripture that God had sworn an oath on Himself to give the land of Canaan to Israel (Gen 17:8 etc.).

V3 ***‘Go to a land flowing with milk and honey ...’** There is no verb ‘go to ...’ at the beginning of the Hebrew sentence here, but Hebrew has far longer sentences than we have in English, and it really begins ‘go to the land I promised ...’ in verse 1. In order to make sense of the sentence structure, most translations add ‘go to’, therefore repeating the verb from verse 1.*

V4 ***‘and no one wore ornaments.’** It would be natural for us to assume that we are talking about women’s ornament here, but the text specifically says that this was the action of the men, not the women!*

Going Deeper

Why did God pick this moment to speak about going to the Promised Land (33:1-3)?

God’s promise of a land for His people had stood ever since he revealed it to Abraham (Genesis 13:14-18, and confirmed in later passages), and there are a number of references in Exodus to the eventual destiny of the people of Israel. Moses was told that he would lead the people to ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ when he was first called by God at the burning bush in the Sinai desert (3:8:17), and he was also told that many nations would be displaced for them (‘the Canaanites, the Amorites, etc.’ – 33:2). However, when Moses first led the people out of Egypt, he declared the objective to be the worship of God (10:7 etc.). The first time the people learned of their coming journey was when God revealed it in the laws and instructions he gave Moses immediately after giving the Ten Commandments (23:20-33).

Interestingly, the Lord said both there and in this passage that He would send an angel before the people to lead the way (23:20, 33:2). In Scripture, we find that angels frequently become indistinguishable from the presence of God Himself (as in Genesis 16:7f.), but the promise of an angel was far short of what the people felt they needed. Contrary to how people live today, people of ancient times felt naked and defenceless within the world without the presence of a god. For them, the world was a far more dangerous place than we perceive it to be, and their gods were part of their essential protection. Indeed, they had built a golden calf initially because they felt they needed the protection of a visible god, like other nations of the day.

The overall effect of this suggests that here in our text, God spoke these words to tell them that He was still their God, but He added a stunning qualification; He would not remain ‘in the midst’ of His people. God boldly summoned the people to their great destiny because he had a Covenant to fulfil. After His conversation with Moses (32:11-14), He had decided to maintain it, and He expected the people to rise to the great challenge of claiming this land as their own. However, for their own protection, He would not remain close to them. The people were sinful and God described them as ‘stiff-necked’. If they rebelled against Him again, then their lives would be in danger as they had been before, so although God would not leave them spiritually, He said He would not be ‘among’ them in a visible form. What He said was tantamount to saying that the Tabernacle need not be built!

Why did the Israelites strip off their ornaments (33:4-6)?

There is good news and bad news in what God said in the first three verses, but we learn immediately that typically of people under stress, the people of Israel could not appreciate the good news, they only heard the bad (33:4). For them, the eventual destiny was of little consequence if their God would not travel with them. In the passage we have read, the punishment that the Israelites found so hard to bear is repeated in verse 5 not simply for our benefit, but to emphasise the importance of this point. God could not dwell with an unrepentant people.

However, the people began to show an appropriate response to God’s words, and this is probably the reason why God was eventually able to change His mind and travel with the people (see 33:17). They ‘mourned’, and as a means of demonstrating this, they took off their ornaments. If you have read the translation notes, you will be aware that the ornaments did not refer to women’s jewellery, but to the ornamentation that the men wore. We have no idea what this was, whether it was rings or any form of body piercing (in those days, both were common in Egypt, from where they had come).

The order of the verses is a little strange here, because as we read, it sounds initially (in verse 4) as if the people did this of their own accord, but as we reach verses 5 and 6, the text informs us that Moses had told the people that they would have to do this to please God. Nevertheless, they did what was required, and verse 6 adds that from this point onwards in their journey, the Israelites did not wear ornamentation. There are plenty of indications elsewhere in the Old Testament that people wore jewellery later on, so this passage was never read by Israelites as a blanket ban on jewellery.

What was the purpose of the ‘Tent of Meeting’ (33:7-11)

The description of Moses and his 'Tent of Meeting' in verses 7 to 11 is quite remarkable. Placed as it is in the passage, it reads rather like an addendum, placed here to give us information, but not contributing very much to the story line. The grammar of the paragraph indicates throughout that this was something Moses 'used to do' by way of regular practice, presumably before the Tabernacle was built. The significance of it may simply be that in the midst of the high drama and the intense feelings of the time, Moses continued to do his duties as leader and priest of the people, as before.

It remains strange that there has been no mention so far in Exodus of a Tent of Meeting set up by Moses apart from the Tabernacle (yet to be built), but the more you think about it, the more logical it is that Moses should have had a tent to be used in this way. We can think of it as a 'mini' Tabernacle, used as a place where people would go to seek the Lord's judgement through the mediation of Moses, and the presence of the Lord was symbolised by the presence of the cloud, the sign of God's presence since the days of the crossing of the Red Sea (13:21f.).

The mental picture that stands out from this passage, however, is the separation between the people and the Tent, and with it the presence of the Lord. There is a certain fearfulness to the description of the people watching while Moses went to the tent to commune with God, and remaining at their own tents when bowing down to worship (33:8,10). The passage makes it very clear that not only did Moses retain the right to enter the Lord's presence, but so did Joshua, the future leader of God's people (33:11). These two alone were acceptable before God after the catastrophic events of recent days.

Application

One small point is worth making about jewellery. To this day, some Christian communities suggest that jewellery and ornamentation is forbidden for those who are following the Lord as His disciples, and this text is used to support the idea. There are other passages of scripture that mention jewellery (e.g. Hosea 2:13, Ezekiel 16:17, and Rev 17:4f.) but they all make different points and there is no command of God to be found that forbids the wearing of jewellery by men or women. So, it stretches the text here to suggest that those who want to follow the Lord's will should always remove all jewellery, and for a general principle about such things, it is best to recall that the Bible speaks frequently about moderation and selflessness as appropriate to godliness. If we keep this in mind, then we will not go far wrong.

The importance of the Israelites removing their jewellery is not in the jewellery itself, but in what the deed meant. For not only were the people mourning because they had offended God, they were willing to do what God said, and were willing to do something to correct what had gone wrong. This is the first step to what we call repentance, and a restored relationship with God. We often say that the first step to repairing a relationship is always the hardest, and this true of this story; it tells us about the importance of taking the first step of repentance so that the sins we have committed may be dealt with by God and our relationship restored. Unfortunately, it is too easy to forget the importance of this lesson, even though it is deeply rooted in the basic message of the Gospel, and the preaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus (see Matt 3:11, 4:17).

This passage, and the rest of verse 33 asks some sharp questions about how we think God deals with people and whether He is willing to change His mind according to how we respond to Him. On the one hand, some people believe that God is unchangeable and knows everything, so what happens only ever appears to change God's mind. So in this story, for example, they might suggest that God was so much in control of what was happening here that He knew how the Israelites would respond, and His threat that he would not travel among the Israelites was merely a means of getting the Israelites to respond and Moses to intercede.

I am not sure this is a good way of describing what happens here, because such a stance makes it appear as if God is prepared to lie to people to get them to do what He wants (that is, in saying He will not come among them when He will). I prefer to suggest that the passage indicates that God's ultimate will (His Covenant) cannot be undermined, nevertheless, God is responsive to the real sins of His people in punishment, and the needs of His people for forgiveness and redemption based on their choice to respond to Him. Of course, there are always aspects of God character and work that we will never fully understand, but I prefer to believe that God will respond to the real decisions people take. Here, the small step of repentance on the part of the people is sufficient for God to listen and revoke the threatened punishment; for the Tabernacle was built, and God did travel among His people because the relationship was restored. Real decisions have real consequences for both earth and heaven, and this is why repentance and forgiveness work, as Jesus demonstrated in His own life and ministry.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. From within this passage, discuss what you believe the Lord was wanting from His people.

2. From within this passage, discuss what you believe the people wanted from God, and whether they were right to seek this.
3. Discuss the actions of Moses and the meaning of pitching the 'Tent of Meeting' outside the camp.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

As I have written this passage, you will probably see that I have written it with the normal consequences of division between people in mind. I sincerely think that God used this situation to tell us about repairing relationship with Him and also with each other in this passage. If we are to deal with our sin before God, then we often need help and ministry from others, just as the Israelites needed Moses. If we are to deal with the breakdown that happens between others and ourselves then the Lord is at hand waiting to minister to us.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on whether there have been any situations in the life of your church, where the people have been paralysed and ineffective because of their sin. Has anything been learned from such situations, or do people just get on with life? Are matters hushed away or dealt with? Pray that God's people will always be willing to let the Lord help them deal with difficulties.*
- *Pray for people who are going through divorce or who are experiencing any other significant break up within their family because of bad feeling or difficulties that have arisen.*

Final Prayer

The glory of Your presence O Lord is beyond our comprehension. You have made Yourself available to us in surprising and helpful ways, and demonstrated Your love and compassion even when we have strayed from Your ways. May we be alert and responsive to Your presence O Lord, each and every day of our lives; AMEN.
