

Text: Exod. 31:18-32:10
Title: "Israel's great sin"
Time: 1/14/2024 am
Place: NBBC

Introduction: The problem of sin in our lives is a lot like the disease of cancer in many ways. Some of you know that I am a recent cancer survivor. I had a section of my colon removed to deal with a cancerous tumor there. During my exam, my gastrointestinal doctor removed a number of smaller tumors, some which were precancerous, and some which were benign, but all which needed to be removed. But then he found that great tumor that would mean surgery to remove a large part of an otherwise healthy organ in my body.

In our passage Moses discovers among the people of God what he calls a great sin (32:21, 31). All sin is a transgression of God's law and condemnable under the penalty of that law, which is death. God's holy standard is clear: "The soul that sinneth, he shall die" (Ezek. 18:20); "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). There is no benign sin, or pre-cancerous sin. Every sin is spiritual cancer, the deadly killer of the sinner. Every sin we have sinned separates us from our holy God, that which needs a work of atonement in order for us to be right with Him again. Rom. 3:23, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

Nevertheless, Moses refers to what happens in this passage as Israel's *great sin*. While it is true that every sin condemns before our holy God, some sins are greater sins than others. As we think of the great sins of Israel's history, the golden calf incident of our passage is the first. Perhaps you can look back on your own life and remember some great sins, as I can. This morning we will focus on the first ten verses of our chapter, noting three ways in which Israel's sin was their great sin.

I. Israel's great sin was great forgetfulness (31:18-32:1).

Application: You may remember that *Exodus* means *the way out*. The book is about Yahweh's determination and power to redeem His people from bondage, to provide for them a way out of slavery in Egypt. The first four chapters described their need for a deliverer and the way God chose a deliverer for them. Next, in chapters 5-18, we read the history of this mighty work of deliverance. From the first plague in Egypt to the parting of the Red Sea, the Lord worked mighty miracles to redeem His people. He does the same each time He saves a sinner from his sin.

Then in chapter 19 through the end of the book, the text describes the life of the redeemed. People delivered from the bondage of sin's slavery live differently for the Lord now that they are free. The life of the redeemed is a covenantal life, a lawful life, and a worshipping life.

So, it is this redeemed people of Exodus who are quoted in verse 1. Israel's sin was great, in part, because the sin was Israel's. Israel's sin was a great rejection of previous blessing. Moses is atop Sinai receiving two stone tablets, written on both sides with the finger of God, containing the content of chapter 20, the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. That law was the outgrowth of the covenantal relationship established between the Lord and His people in chapter 19.

That chapter remembers the commitment these people had made to the Lord at that time: "And all the people answered together, and said, 'All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.' And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord" (19:8); "And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words which the Lord hath said will we do'" (24:3).

But with Moses's absence after only forty days and nights (Deut. 9:11), now in possession of these precious stone tablets,

engraved in stone as the Lord's permanent commitment to love and lead His redeemed people, those same people want to throw it all away in exchange for some other gods.

How could that be? How could Israel sin this great sin? How could they have witnessed so many mighty miracles with their own eyes and still have thrown it all away after a month and a half? How could they value so lowly what God had done for them as His redeemed people?

The answer, of course, is they did so the same way we do so when we live for other gods rather than the Lord, our Redeemer. Each time we serve money, pleasure, and self more than our Savior, we do so having forgotten the mighty miracle of our redemption and the worthiness of our Redeemer for our love, obedience, and devotion. We, like these Israelites, would rather have gods of our own making, those who do what we want. We forget the worthiness of the One who tells us what to do. Israel's great sin was great forgetfulness of the miracles of God's grace to them. Ours is too.

II. Israel's great sin was great idolatry (32:2-6).

Illustration: When we think of great idolatry, we often think of scenarios like the one faced by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. The Babylonian king set up an image of gold and commanded all of his princes to bow down before it. These three friends of Daniel refused to bow to what was clearly a pagan idol, and their stand was rewarded by the Lord when they were protected in the king's fiery furnace.

Application: This situation in our passage is different from that, however. One commentator explains this difference: "These chapters do not record total abandonment of the worship of Jehovah On the contrary, they illustrate that subtle process by which idolatrous practices were used in the worship of the God of Israel" (Davis, 291).

What made this episode of idolatry a “subtle process” of “idolatrous practices . . . in the worship of the God of Israel” was the poor leadership of Aaron. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Aaron understood that Israel needed to worship Jehovah/ Yahweh, the true God. So, when the people demand that he make new gods for them, Aaron comes up with a directive that he may have hoped would put an end to the whole scheme. He tells the people that their idolatry is going to cost them their gold. But the idolatrous hearts of the people call Aaron’s bluff and willingly pay up. They gladly give him the gold of their earrings.

Idolatrous religion has always had enough gold. An article listed the net worth of the top ten churches in the world:

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter- Day Saints - \$100B.
2. Catholic Church Vatican - \$33B.
3. Catholic Church Germany - \$26B.
4. Catholic Church Australia - \$22.3B.
5. Church of England - \$9B.
6. Catholic Opus Dei of Italy - \$3B.
7. Church of Scientology - \$2.5B.
8. Episcopalian Church - \$2B.
9. Freemasonry - unspecified.
10. Kenneth Copeland Ministries - \$1B.

You may notice that many of the top 10 are Roman Catholic institutions that really should be added together, along with the many other Roman Catholic institutions not on the list, like the Roman Catholic Church USA. The wealth of that Church all put together has been described as incalculable.

You may have noticed also that New Boston Baptist Church did not make the list. Our passage indicates that people with idolatrous hearts will give sacrificially to their idolatry. But think too of the money spent in our nation on secular idols that have nothing to do with false churches, our possessions

and pleasures and pride. May we lay up treasure in heaven in support of true gospel ministry.

So having received the gold, Aaron makes the image, and he includes an altar, evidently hoping that something pagan could be adapted to the true worship of Yahweh (v. 5). The attempt seems successful at first as the result looks very much like the worship of Yahweh early the next morning (v. 6), but then the verse ends, "and rose up to play." The word translated *to play* there is the word translated *caressed*, when Gen. 26:8 tells us that Abimelech saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah, after Isaac had told him she was merely his sister. One commentator explains: "The verb translated 'to play' suggests illicit and immoral sexual activity which normally accompanied fertility rites found among the Canaanites who worshipped the god Baal" (Davis, 295).

We learn something important about pagan worship here. The idolatrous worship of paganism has often relied on sexual attraction. Attempts today to incorporate sexual attraction, drugs, or rock-n-roll into the worship of the true God is a compromise similar to that of Aaron in this passage. We must resist the temptation to compromise our worship with pagan worldliness, because Israel's great sin was great idolatry, even though they called it a festival for Yahweh.

III. Israel's great sin was a great offense (32:7-10).

Illustration: When a horse does not want to be led by the one holding the reins, it stiffens its neck and pulls away.

Application: That is the picture behind the metaphor the Lord uses to describe His people (v. 9). He had been pulling the reins to bless them as His redeemed people, but they have stiffened their neck and tugged in disobedience in the opposite direction.

God says that they have acted corruptly (v. 7), using the same word used of spiritual conditions in the days of Noah just prior to the global flood in Gen. 6:12. He describes their idolatry in detail, having seen it all thoroughly (v. 8).

Psalm 106:19-20, "They made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image. Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass." God is glorious; He is the glory of His people; He is not a calf; He does not eat grass. They turned so very quickly from God's Word (v. 8).

We may claim innocence, having never once thought of God as an ox eating grass, but how quickly do we fall back into the habit of neglecting our time in His Word? For all these reasons, Israel's great sin was a great offense. We too have offended greatly.

How must holy God respond to a great sin, which is great forgetfulness of His goodness to us, great idolatry that worships what we want and how we want instead of worshipping Him as He desires, and a great offense that turns quickly away from His Word and commandments?

Our passage tells us that our holy God responds in two ways. The first is a response of His nature, and the second a response of His will. By the force of His holy nature, God responds to this sin with wrath (v. 10). He can never leave sin unpunished. That is the response of His holy nature, and we would not want our God to be a judge who tolerates sin and evil (Minneapolis had one, and look what has happened there).

But by the grace of His will, God also responds to this sin by putting the fate of these sinners into the hands of a competent mediator. He tells Moses that they are his people (v. 7). He tells Moses that if Moses left Him alone, He would destroy these people and raise a new nation from him. It is one thing

to destroy a nation; it is another to tell their leader that you are going to do so if he leaves you alone.

We must see the Lord's gracious mercy in this response to Israel's great sin. They were not destroyed by God's nature because of God's will. They were given the hope of an effectual mediator. The Lord knew that Moses loved the people and would be a competent mediator for them. He did not destroy the sinners; He made a way for them to escape destruction by providing a savior for them.

Conclusion: Clearly, the competence of Moses was lacking in Aaron. Aaron was the high priest of Israel, and yet Moses had to plead for his forgiveness too as he had participated in Israel's great sin.

This morning we are looking back with great admiration and thanks, like the author of Hebrews did, on the mediation of Moses in this hour of need : "Moses was faithful in all his house" (Heb. 3:2). And yet, the day came when Moses too failed, and he had to be replaced by Joshua, having been disallowed entrance into the Promised Land. The author of Hebrews remembers this too, and so points us to the Ultimate Mediator between God and Man, the man Jesus Christ:

"Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, Today

if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. . . . Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end" (3:1-14).

Israel sinned a great sin, but they survived the wrath of their holy God because, in love and mercy, God provided them with a mediator in Moses. We too have sinned greatly, and the Lord has made a better provision for us in Jesus Christ. He died in our place, taking our penalty for breaking God's law, which He kept perfectly. This he did even for Moses and his people, so God's wrath would turn from them.

Let's trust Him for the forgiveness we need for our great sins.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching