

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to wait. Whether its waiting for our holidays or a bus it's never easy to do so especially if you are an impatient sort of person. It's even harder to wait for God to act. In our own day we long to see God turn things around it seems that God is slow to act and the temptation to rush God along a little is very real. Well this is the same temptation that we find the people of Israel facing in this chapter. Moses entered the cloud on Mount Sinai and remained there for 40 days and nights (24:18).

Now at the end of that period God gives Moses the stone tablets containing His law as indeed He had promised in 24:12. God is the author of this law because it comes from the finger of God (31:18). Now in this chapter the scene changes it moves from the top of the mountain to the drama unfolding at foot of the mountain. The people had promised to obey the Lord (24:3) yet here we find the people breaking the first two laws of the 10 commandments that Moses is holding in his very hands.

The contrast between what is happening at the top of the mountain and what is happening at the bottom could not be greater.

1. THE PEOPLE'S REQUEST (vs. 1-6)

For some weeks the people has been waiting at the foot of the mountain for Moses to come down. The people had grown tired of waiting on Moses and ultimately upon God. The word translated "so long" (v 1) often carried the idea of shame and perhaps here the people are feeling that they are being put to shame by Moses' long departure. So the people gathered around Aaron and the term implies a sinister intent. The people were rebellious in spirit and Aaron was going to help them whether he wanted to or not.

Their request was simply "come make us gods who will go before us" (v 1). The reason why they make this request is that they are convinced that "this fellow Moses" (v 1) a term of disrespect doesn't appear to be coming back. The people were desperate for someone to lead them and obviously Aaron was not meeting that need. You see although the people could not see God they could see Moses before he went up the mountain for he was their mediator.

Now that they cannot see him and do not know what has happened to him they decide that they need someone or something physical to lead them. They were obviously afraid of the unknown future, how would they cope with what lies ahead? So they simply ask for gods to lead them. After all the nations that surrounded them had man made gods so why not Israel? In Egypt where they had come from it was not unknown to have hundreds of gods the Egyptians had gods for every situation you could think off.

What was Aaron going to do? Was he going to stand up to this intimidating group of people or was he going to remain true to God's commandments. Well he gives in and he asks the people for their gold earrings.

These were very valuable to the people they were given them to the Israelites when they left Egypt (11:2-3 and 12:35-36). The earrings may well have had some religious significance with the Egyptians and so Aaron is using what has been used in the Egyptian religion to make a god just like the Egyptians had. So Aaron makes a golden calf but why a calf? Probably because in Egypt the calf was a symbol of a very strong animal and the Israelites needed a strong God if they were ever to enter Canaan.

Also the most well known Egyptian god was the bull god of Apis perhaps Aaron is trying to copy this type of god. When the golden calf was made then the people who wanted the god turned to the rest of the Israelites and said “these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt (v 4). The term “gods” is unusual seeing that only one god has been made but it may well be that the people see this god as representation of their God (Jehovah) plus other gods who were helping Israel. In other words they were reflecting syncretism where they adopted some parts of the religion of the Egyptians into their own religion. They are also guilty of polytheism of having more than one God. They see this golden calf as representing Jehovah and other gods that they believed were at work in their deliverance out of Egypt.

Aaron realises what is going on and calls on the people the very next day to hold a festival to the Lord. But he makes the mistake of building the altar in front of the calf. Perhaps Aaron’s intention was to try and help the people get back to the Lord but his actions only encouraged the people to worship the calf and they did the things associated with pagan worship the eating and drinking and indulging in revelry.

The term ‘revelry’ is used of laughter and teasing and dancing and sexual activity within the Old Testament. Perhaps all of this was going on for that is what would happen at Egyptian pagan festivals.

Now can people who have seen God work in such dramatic ways i.e. the plagues and red sea turn so easily from him and break the very commandments that they promised that they would obey? How could a people become so ungrateful? I think in application we need to recognise that the church of today can also desert the Lord in this way and can so easily adopt other gods instead of the one true God. In the book Acts we are told that these people rejected God in their hearts and turned back to Egypt (Acts 7:39). So their sin started in their hearts they decided that they were not going to obey the Lord; they rejected him and once you do that then you will adopt other gods to replace the one true God. Let me try to give you some situations where the church today could do this.

We can become so impatient with God working in our own situations that we can simply adopt other gods in order to help change our situation. The people in Moses day would not wait any longer so they took things into their own hands. So a church longs to see growth but none seems to be taking place so they decide to give God a helping hand by turning to methods that in themselves become their gods.

So for example music becomes the important thing the band is all that matters and so the preaching gets less and the music increases. The church is encouraged by new people coming along especially young people; so they continue to reject the Lord in their hearts and replace him with the god of music and often dancing. Of course it is subtle. I am sure none of the Israelites thought they were rejecting God by their actions but their actions proved they were.

The way that churches are encouraging people to watch the film the passion of Jesus Christ in spite of the fact that it is breaking the second commandment clearly shows that the church today is not immune from deserting the Lord. It’s possible to adopt parts of other religions into our own because we lack the patience to wait upon God. There are Christians today who no longer believe in hell but believe in annihilation. There are plenty of other religions who believe that.

Some churches see their own building as holy they would never say that but listen to how some people talk about church buildings and the way they even treat them and it soon becomes obvious that the building is very much central to their idea of God’s presence with his people. The building has actually become more important than their God whom they worship in the building.

There are plenty of religions in our world who tie their building to their god in the same way as some Christians I have known do.

I knew a lady once who was a Christian for many years a lady I respect much for she appeared to be very godly. Once while visiting her in her bedroom because she was poorly she opened a draw beside her bed and took out a little picture that she said was Jesus and said, "I speak to him every night." She was sincere but wrong, she was doing what these Israelites are doing at the foot of the mountain. I have heard Christians speak of the calling of their new Pastor in such a way that they have it seems replaced God with their Pastor. Everything will now be all right the Pastor is here now. Of course Pastors are God's gift to the church but unless God comes among his people and works no Pastor will change the situation.

Now we might not do any of the things I have mentioned but nevertheless we need to be careful that in our hearts we do not reject God for if we do then we will have other gods to replace the one true God. Let us be careful that we do not break God's first two commandments let us make sure that we have no other gods before Him and that we do not allow anything tangible to represent God.

We walk by faith not by sight; so when it seems to us that God is slow in working do not lose heart keep trusting and keep praying and keeping looking only unto God.

2. THE LORD'S RESPONSE (vs. 7-8)

We now move back to the top of the mountain in order to hear God's response to the people. God who is sovereign and is all seeing and all knowing describes and explains to Moses what is going on at the foot of the mountain. The people says God have become 'corrupt' by turning to an idol and by worshipping it and giving themselves over to syncretism. God is angry with his people. This is seen in the fact that God calls them your people not his people (v 7). Moses these people must be yours for they cannot be my people by the way that they are living.

Right throughout Exodus we are constantly reminded that it was the Lord God who brought the people out of the Egypt but now the Lord has disowned his people and tells Moses that the people **he** brought out of Egypt are corrupt. The people have broken the covenant that they were given through Moses as a result the Lord has distanced himself from the people.

God calls these people "stiff necked" (v 9). Now we all have I'm sure experienced stiff necks from time to time. We want the neck to turn one way and it will not move. Well God says that is like these people they will not move God's way they refuse to obey Him. They are stubborn they will not turn the direction that the Lord tells them to turn. The Lord asks Moses to leave him alone that he might pour his wrath out and destroy these people.

He will however start again and fulfil his promises through Moses (v 10). Now before we go on to look at Moses response let us be clear here that God deplores sin and punishes it. We also must be clear that God sees sin differently from us. He states clearly here that the making of an idol is corrupt and that he would be right to destroy the people as a result. Now I am not sure or perhaps I should say I am sure that we do not view sin like this even those of us who are Christian people can be quite tolerate of sin. How do we view the Muslim or the Buddhist or the Mormon or the average person in our family or street?

In a day of religious tolerance and political correctness we are often afraid to say that such people are corrupt. O they might be good moral upright people in our eyes but they are corrupt because they are worshipping idols instead of the true and living God. The person who says that she is open-minded when it comes to religion is corrupt. This is not a subject to be open-minded about;

we are told very clearly that the worship of any other god or the making of images to worship the true God makes one corrupt.

As a result God has every right to judge condemn and punish such people. If you are a Christian then you too were once corrupt and even now we can become corrupt by setting up idols in our hearts. You can to God's word and yet still be corrupt and condemned by God. If you have never surrendered your life to the Lord Jesus and pleaded for mercy and salvation then you have idols in your heart for you are not worshipping the one true God for you can only do that through Jesus Christ. So turn to him today otherwise you are inviting God's wrath to come upon you and one day it will when you are cast from his presence forever into that everlasting place of punishment.

If you are a Christian then don't allow idols to be set up in your heart otherwise God will turn from us and distance himself from us and discipline us. He will seem to be far from us and we will have a sense of barrenness within our hearts. Our prayers will seem to be going no further than the ceiling and our bible reading will seem dry and meaningless.

If you have that sense already today then ask God to search your heart and expose any idols that are there so that you can repent and turn to God. Then we will once again enjoy his lovely presence with us and can benefit from fellowship with Him through his Son and by His Spirit.

3. MOSES REACTION (vs. 11-14)

When Moses hears what is going on and what the Lord intends to do he intervenes in seeking the favour of God for his people (v 11). He wants God to show grace instead of wrath to these people at the foot of the mountain. Moses is acting as covenant mediator and intercessor between God at the top of the mountain and the people at the foot of it. Moses presents three arguments as to why the Lord ought to turn his just wrath from the Israelites. First Moses reminds the Lord that these people are his people (v 11). These are the ones that the Lord chose and delivered from the hand of the Egyptians.

Secondly Moses points out that the Egyptians would surely mock both God and his people if he destroys them. They would say "that God has merely been toying with Israel and that his plan all along was not to save them but to destroy them." His honour is at stake. One of the principle purposes of the exodus and in particular the series of plagues was so that the Egyptians might know whom the Lord is and how powerful He is in redeeming his people (7:5, 8:10 and 9:14).

If God were now to destroy Israel Egypt would not be convinced that the Lord is indeed God. Moses third reason is that these Israelites embodied the fulfilment of the promises God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If God destroyed these people it would be seen as if God was going back on his covenant promises.

In all of Moses reasoning he does not try to justify the sins of these people for he knew they were unjustifiable. Moses rather pleads for the mercy of God on the basis of God's character and promises. The Lord responds by relenting and He does not bring the disaster upon the people. People can get very hung up with the idea of God relenting or repenting as the older translations put it because they think it is suggesting that God is changing his mind. Of course God cannot change his mind; his purposes are fixed. What we have here is God accommodating himself to our language.

He is explaining to us in our language how prayer works. We cannot fully understand the workings and ways of God, but we are being allowed to see how he works through this incident. He is responding to the prayer of Moses and therefore it seems from our human perspective that God has changed his mind. In reality he is just acting in a different way as a result of Moses prayer.

Prayer really does change things, in fact we would not have Moses prayer if God had not of revealed his purpose to destroy.

The very purpose of revealing that to Moses was to get him to pray so that God would act in grace and compassion instead of wrath. This section is a real encouragement to pray. When we pray God acts in response to it. God reveals his purposes of judgement so that his people will pray and plead for mercy and then God acts in compassion and grace towards sinners. In this way God gets the glory and we get encouraged through God answering our prayers.

So as we think of God's many statements in the Bible of his intention to punish sinners it should move us and motivate us to pray that God will have mercy upon sinners. My dear friends don't be afraid to use biblical arguments in prayer, remind God of his word not for his benefit for he never forgets but for our benefit. God has promised to save sinners and take them to glory.

So let's pray towards that end; let's pray reminding God that he has chosen his people from before the creation of the world; how would He be honoured if He failed to save those He has chosen. Remind God that his enemies would mock him if He redeemed his people but failed to take them safety to heaven. Finally remind the Lord of his covenant of faithfulness towards his people.

Remind him that He cannot go back on his word He has to save sinners He has to fulfil his covenant promises. Are you not encouraged to pray as a result of Moses prayer? We know that God fulfils his promises and the amazing thing is that He allows us to play a part in their fulfilment by praying for those promises to be fulfilled. God will build his church so pray for sinners to be saved and added to his church. That is a prayer that will and must be answered.

So let us pray!

Amen