

INTRODUCTION

While Moses was up the mountain meeting with God the people were indulging in idolatry. God saw all that was going on and told Moses. Now Moses is of course the covenant mediator between God and his people. God is going to punish these people and start again but Moses seeks God's favour and God relents from bringing the disaster upon the people. That is where we left the story last time.

1. MOSES RESPONSE TO THE PEOPLE'S IDOLATRY (vs.15-20)

Moses comes down from the top of Sinai with the tablets of law in his hands. Although we are never told the size of the tablets they were obviously light enough for Moses to carry them and small enough for them to fit into the Ark of the Covenant (3 ft. 9 in long, 2 ft. 3 in. wide and 2 ft. 3in. high). Part way down the mountain Moses meets Joshua. In 24:13 Moses had taken Joshua with him up mountain and it seems that Joshua had only gone part way up the mountain while Moses ascends to the summit.

So while Moses is meeting with God Joshua is waiting on him part way up the mountain while the people waited at the foot of the mountain. Moses hears the voices of the people shouting and comments to Moses that it sounds like war. But Moses in a little pithy saying (v 18) knows that it is the sound of singing that he hears; Moses knows that it is the evidence of the Idolatry that God told him about. As Moses and Joshua reached the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses sees for himself what God had previously told him. He saw the calf and the dancing of the people and his anger burned.

It is commendable to note that Moses is reacting exactly how God reacted when the golden calf was built (v 10). Moses is very much in tune with his God. Moses clearly understands just how heinous the sin of the people was. He smashes the tablets that had the law of them. This is a highly symbolic thing to do. This is not a fit of rage, a fly of the handle anger. No! The Israelites by their action had shattered the covenant with their God; therefore Moses smashes the sign of the covenant before their very eyes.

The covenant agreement has been broken the very laws that were at the heart of the agreement have been totally ignored and broken. The people by Moses actions were being told the covenant has been smashed already by the people's disobedience.

The last time we read about the Israelites singing and dancing is in Exodus 15:20-21 when the people held a great celebration because of God's wonderful deliverance of the people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. Now sadly they are singing and dancing again but this time in honour of a golden calf. O how far the people have fallen.

Moses takes the golden calf and destroys it. He grounds it down into fine dust and scatters it upon the water and makes the people drink it. This is probably a visual picture of the uselessness of idols. If an idol could not save itself how then could they bow down and worship such a useless thing. It's to hammer home the point that idols are nothing; they cannot see, hear or respond (Psalm 115:5-7). Look how foolish the people have been.

There are two applications that I want us to think about. Firstly we need to be real about the danger of having idols in our lives. If these people who saw God work in redemption in very dramatic ways could soon abandon him for other gods then we too who have seen God redeem us through Christ could easily turn to other gods. If we think that it could never happen to us then you are in even more danger than you think.

The truth is we all set up idols in our hearts and that's why from time to time it's good to take a check on oneself. We need to ask God to reveal our hearts to us.

What is it that we really love? Allow yourself to think about that for a minute. Now you will have all sorts of answers to that question wife and husband, children, grandchildren, hobbies, interests, possessions and so on. Now having done that in your mind I want you to prioritise those things that you love with the most loved number one and so on. Now be honest no one will know what we have at number 1 or 2 and so on.

Finally ask yourself where did God come in that list. If He is anywhere else than number 1 then you do have idols in your heart. If you put Jesus as No 1 in your mental list then I want us to think again and ask if our lifestyle, our commitments our attitudes etc. really reflects the fact that the Lord is number 1. If not then again you and I have idols in our hearts and Jesus is not as high up our list as we thought.

Is God really the first person that we think about in the morning and the last person we think about in the evening? Is He the one that we talk to and talk about the most? Is He the first person consulted on every decision? If before we do anything do we think what God would want us to do? Before we spend money or go on holiday or do some activity is God at all part of our thinking. If you can answer in the affirmative to all those questions then you are probably an exceptional Christian who really walks with God. You would not agree with that of course because part of your godliness is your humility, but everyone else will know that you are godly. If however like me you could not answer in the affirmative then in all likelihood you have idols in your heart.

Something or someone is robbing God of His glory in our lives and we need to take radical action as a result. We need to destroy that idol in our hearts so that God can reign supreme. Let's not be naïve about idols; let's not be too proud to admit to God that idols reign in our hearts for He knows anyway. Let us seek his grace and his forgiveness to get rid of them and to replace them with the one who is the only one worthy of worship.

The Lord Jesus died in order to deal with the sin of idols in our hearts so confess our sin to God apply the blood of Jesus to that sin and let's not be people who make God angry because of our idolatry. But let us be a people who bring praise and glory to his great and glorious name.

The second application I want to make will help us to keep idols out of our heart. That will happen if we have the same attitude to idols that God has and that Moses displays here. Both God and Moses burn with anger when they see what is happening at the foot of the mountain. Why were they so angry? Because they both burned with jealousy for God's glory and honour. Idols rob God of his honour and God is jealous for his own glory and honour.

Now if only we displayed such a jealousy in our hearts then not only would the idolatry of others make us righteously angry but it will also protect us from setting up idols within our own hearts. What is it that we desire more than anything else in this world? Is it that God might be honoured in our world? Is that what drives us and motivates us in this world. If it is then all that we do will be for his honour and not for ours.

So we will evangelise because people are robbing God of the honour due to him and we long for people to honour God in their lives. We come to church not to please the Elders or to show how godly we are but we come to worship God because we want him to be glorified and receive honour through our worship. We work for a living not so much to meet our own needs or the needs of others but to bring glory to Him through our work.

You see once we have such a jealousy for God's glory and for his honour then we will be angry at idolatry as we see it displayed in the lives of unbelievers and in the lives of his people. We will want everyone to honour God and to bring God the glory due to him alone. It will also mean that we will detest idols within our own hearts and will deal with them as soon as we realise they are there because we do not want to steal from God the honour that rightfully belongs to him.

2. AARON 'S SIN INCREASES (vs. 21-24)

Moses now summons Aaron to give an account of what has happened. Aaron along with Hur had been left in charge of the people while Moses was gone (24:14) he was therefore responsible for the actions of the people. Moses knew these Israelites well, he knew about their rebellious hearts so he asks Aaron about what they did to make Aaron commit such sin.

What pressure did they bring to bear upon Aaron? But Moses in no way lets Aaron off the hook here. As the one who would soon be High Priest Aaron had brought on the people a great sin. He was responsible especially when dealing with issues of worship and religious practise.

Moses describes it as a 'great sin.' This term is used in the Old Testament to refer to idolatry but it was also a legal term for adultery. When it comes to the worship of God in the Old Testament these two terms, idolatry and adultery are closely related they are two sides of the same coin. In leading the people into idolatry Aaron was leading the people into spiritual adultery. Aaron pleads with Moses not to be angry with him and then gives an unbelievable and laughable explanation. He is attempting to justify his own actions here (vs. 23-24) by placing the blame and the guilt on the people.

He tells Moses that you know Moses how prone these people are to evil, a very true statement. It's as if he is saying it's not really my fault; you know what these people are like Moses; given half an opportunity they will revert to sin.

Aaron also argues that what had been done was not as wrong as it may appear. The god was made to take the place of Moses not the Lord? The people simply wanted something visual to replace Moses. "Moses my actions are not as bad as you think" that is exactly what Aaron is saying. Then he gives his explanation (v 24). He speaks as if the golden calf had made itself.

The idea that a god could self create was a common belief in Egypt. But the absurdity of Aaron comment was the fact that we are told that Aaron formed and made this calf god (v 4). Aaron is trying to deceive Moses into thinking that things are not as bad as they seem. "Moses perhaps you are overreacting here; do you not think so?" But the truth is that Aaron is piling one sin (lying) upon another (idolatry). That is exactly how sin works isn't it?

We know that is how sin works because that is how it works in our lives. We commit some sin and then in our minds we try to cover it up or we try to hide it from other people. This actually only leads us into lying to others or some other sin and before we know it we have gone further and further into sin. One sin always leads to another sin and it often tends to lead to worst sin. Is this not what King David did? His adultery led him to conspiracy to murder. Why? Because David so desperately wanted to cover up his sin. That is our natural tendency; we immediately try to cover up our wrong doing and in doing so we increase in sinful activity. The only way that we will ever confess our sin as soon as we realise we have sinned is to see sin from God's perspective. That's the position that David eventually came to for in his prayer of repentance he said

"Against you, you only have I sinned and did evil in your sight." (Psalm 51:4).

David realised that his sin was evil and it was against God primarily. That's how God sees our sin it is evil because it is against God. Once we really believe that then and only then will we confess

our daily sins to God. If we don't really believe that in our own hearts and not just with our heads then we will continue to trivialise sin and will continue to follow one sin after another.

Not only did Aaron increase in sin but also he played down sin. He said in effect Moses you are misunderstanding what I was doing; I was trying to help the people because we didn't know what had happened to you. That is always the case with sin. We try to play it down or explain our sin in another way. We try to justify our sin to ourselves and to others, but we can never justify it to God. He sees through our feeble attempts to justify our actions. Let me apply this specifically.

We know that there is something we should do; we feel that the Lord would want us to do it or we simply know that the Scriptures command us to do it. Perhaps it entails us being involved in some form of evangelism. But when the night comes to do it we don't go. We feel bad about it so we begin to explain our disobedience away. I had a hard day at work or I have a slight cold or I'm tired or I'm out every other night this week or I'm not very good at that form of evangelism anyway.

We try to explain our failure to ourselves and perhaps to others but ultimately we know in our hearts that we have sinned against God, we have failed to do something we know we ought to have done. Perhaps we try to ease our conscience by saying to ourselves it's not really sin; the Lord knows my heart He knows the week I've had or whatever reason we give. I really wanted to do it but -----. It's so easy to do that, we have all done it; Aaron did it here but God and Moses saw through it. Aaron was only trying to reason away his sin. We need to ask God for grace so that we can really see sin as God sees it and own up to it; confess it before we are led further and further into sin.

I don't really have time to look at the rest of the passage in any great detail. Moses seeing the state of the people (v 25) calls upon the people to stand on the Lord's side. Those who want to live for the Lord come here. The Levites rally to Moses. They then become God's instrument of judgement upon those who were closely involved in the sin of idolatry (vs. 27-28).

However even though about 3000 were directly involved in this sin the whole nation were guilty they were God's covenant people they were all responsible to live for God and to stop false worship. So Moses pleads with God to allow him to die in their place to make atonement for the people. God rejects his offer, for no mere man can make atonement for sin (vs. 29-30).

Moses goes back to God and asks God to forgive the people and if not then blot his own name out of His book (this probably refers to the lamb's book of life in Revelation). But the Lord promises to blot out of his book any who have sinned, Moses is told to go and lead the people to their destination and when the time of judgement comes; it will come (vs. 31-34).

These closing verses teach us that sin must be punished. It teaches us that we can do nothing to make atonement for our own sin. But it also points us to Jesus who did give his life in order to make atonement for sinful people. Moses could not atone for the people's sin because he too was a sinner, but Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God who came and died in order that our sin could be forgiven.

Therefore I can call on all of us to turn from our sin and accept the atonement that has been made in Jesus and if we do that we will not face God's wrath and judgement.

However the last verse is a warning to us all (v 35) that if we fail to accept Jesus atonement for our sin then we will face God's judgement for that sin just as these people did.

Therefore sin is serious; sin must be punished; we cannot atone for our own sin. But God took his own wrath upon himself in Jesus so that we can be forgiven and cleansed from all our sin. Will you

trust Jesus today for salvation or are you going to face his judgement and his punishment because of your failure to turn to Him?

Amen