

REBELLION AGAINST THE LORD

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Israel had very recently entered into a solemn covenant with the LORD and readily agreed to His terms (24:3, 7). The essential requirement for upholding this covenant was faith (Heb 11:6). In the prolonged absence of Moses, and on many subsequent occasions, Israel proved that she lacked sufficient faith to maintain the covenant. Even more astounding than Israel's wholesale repudiation of their covenant, was Aaron's willingness to yield to their idolatrous demands (32:2-5).

While still on the mount, God revealed Israel's self-corruption to Moses and in the same breath disclaimed them as His people (32:7). He was ready to destroy the entire nation and raise up a new one from Moses (32:10; cf. Gen 12:1). God's reaction was not vindictive, but righteous. Considering His holiness and the inviolability of His covenant oaths, God's wrath was quite justified. However, it appears that God's ultimate purpose in this wrathful paroxysm was to test the man Moses. The preservation of Israel and the honor of God were far more important to Moses than his personal advancement. His remonstrance demonstrated a character and concern worthy of the noble office God had called him to fulfill.

When Moses witnessed the debauchery of Israel first hand, his own anger was stirred. He broke the two tables of commandments, destroyed their idol, the golden calf, denounced Aaron for his participation, and dispatched the Levites to execute the perpetrators of Israel's gross sin. The next day Moses rebuked Israel but promised that he would attempt to intercede for them. God responded by inflicting additional punishment upon Israel, but He also vowed to bring them into the Promised Land and to remain among them in a probationary sense (outside the camp).

Moses pled with God that His divine presence would accompany Israel and that He would restore them to full covenant favor. God granted these requests, not because Israel deserved them, but because He was pleased with Moses (33:17). As a final token of God's favor and guarantee that His wrath was abated, Moses requested a full revelation of God's majesty. Even this request was granted, although in a limited sense, since no man can see God's face and live (33:20).

I. Rebellion — 32:1-14

A. Apostasy of Israel — 32:1-6

The protracted stay of Moses upon the mount was both a blessing and a test for Israel. It was a blessing in the sense that the LORD was giving their leader "rules for victorious living," but a test of their patient confidence in the LORD and their mediatorial leader.

32:1 — "Up, make us gods" - The word for "gods" is *elohim*, which is a plural noun. That is how the Authorized Version translates it. *Elohim* is also the name of God, so "God" also is a way it can be translated. The leaders proclaimed a feast to the LORD after the image was made (32:5), so it appears their sin is not the demand for many gods, but the demand for an image of the LORD God, which is a sin punishable by death. The golden calf was an attempt to make an image of the LORD, which is impossible because He is a spirit. This action was nothing short of rank idolatry.

32:2-3 — The absurdity of idolatry is seen in the action of the people. They brought their own jewelry to their own surrogate leader, hoping that he could take these non-

sacred materials and produce a deity worthy of their allegiance. Had their chief concern been the absence of Moses, they would have asked Aaron to take his place and not to produce a substitute cult object.

32:4 — "These be your gods" - God had instructed Moses on Mount Sinai to anoint Aaron high priest. In this capacity, Aaron was to be the custodian of pure religion and the highest representative of the nation in their approach to God. Almost simultaneously he is seen perverting Israel's worship in direct violation of the first two commandments (20:2-5).

B. Anger of the Lord — 32:7-10

32:7-8 — The intensity of God's anger is reflected in His verbal repudiation of Israel. He refers to them as the people of Moses rather than as His own like He did in the past (3:10). The word translated "corrupted" means, "go to ruin" and is used also to describe the degenerate state of humanity in Noah's day (Gen 6:12).

32:9 — "It is a stiff necked people" - Literally, it means they were "perverse." like a horse refusing to turn its head when the reins are pulled. This figure is used of Israel's rebellion on many subsequent occasions (33:3, 5; 34:5; Deut 9:6; 10:16; 2 Chron 30:8; 36:13; Ps 75:5; Jer 17:23; Acts 7:51).

32:10 — "Let me alone that my wrath may wax hot against them" - This was not an absolute decree leaving no room for objection. In fact, it was more likely a test inviting a proper response. Had Moses acquiesced, God could have destroyed Israel and produced a new nation from the seed of Moses. In a very practical sense, the LORD condescended to place the fate of Israel in the hands of Moses. As mediatorial head of that nation, Moses was thereby called upon to demonstrate a spirit worthy of that high calling.

C. Advocacy of Moses — 32:11-14

Moses besought God's mercy on behalf of Israel. Moses believed that God would be glorified and His reputation enhanced by sparing Israel. Moses' argument represents three aspects of God's character which he felt were at stake:

1. God's consistency (32:11) — God had voluntarily chosen Israel as His own people and by historical precedent established the fact that He intended to preserve and bless them.

2. God's compassion (32:12) — If God destroyed Israel in the wilderness, Moses felt that the Egyptians would use it as an occasion to mock the LORD. They would assume that He had all along been intent on their destruction as a merciless deity.

3. God's credibility (32:13) — Although God's unconditional promise to the patriarchs could have been fulfilled through the seed of Moses, he nevertheless felt that God's veracity would be suspect among the surrounding nations. Furthermore, God's purposes with respect to His chosen people would suffer a 600-year setback.

32:14 — "The LORD repented" - An apparent change of mind on the part of God is necessary in order that Moses might be presented with a choice. God did not change His mind; neither were His purposes regarding Israel altered by the prayer of Moses. Moses' prayer was answered because it was consistent with divine will.

II. Reproof — 32:15-35

A. Moses Punishes Israel — 32:15-29

32:15-16 — Two things marked the tables of law as unique: (1) They were written on both sides. This was extremely uncommon in the ancient east. (2) They were shaped and inscribed by God Himself, giving them particular authority and significance.

32:19 — Moses reacted in righteous indignation to the spectacle of debauchery

which he confronted in the congregation. He is neither commended nor rebuked for breaking the tables of the law, but his conduct can certainly be understood in light of the fact that he had spent forty days and nights in the presence of a holy God.

32:20 — The procedure followed by Moses in the destruction of the golden calf may well have been a standard method of eliminating false gods and showing contempt for them (cf. 2 Kgs 23:6, 15). Some commentators suggest a parallel between the water sprinkled with gold dust here and the "water of bitterness" to be drunk by a woman suspected of unfaithfulness to her husband (Num 5:18-22). This could explain how the Levites knew which Israelites to slay if an explanation is even necessary (vs. 27-28). Certainly the public destruction of this idol was a vivid lesson concerning the total impotence of man-made gods (cf. Jer 10:5).

32:21 — Even if Aaron had been pressured by the people to act as he did, this does not diminish his guilt. He had been given leadership responsibility in the absence of Moses (24:14), but failed to exercise that leadership in resisting apostasy.

32:22 — Aaron attempted to justify himself by transferring the guilt to the congregation. This unsuccessful ploy is reminiscent of Adam's similar one (Gen 3:12).

32:23 — Not willing to fully concede his guilt, Aaron attempted to persuade Moses that the formation of the calf was supernatural. Moses did not dignify these vain protestations with an answer but turned abruptly to the nation once again.

32:25 — "Moses saw that the people were naked" — Being unclad or very loosely clad was a feature of the licentious orgies of the east. The Amalekites and others still inhabited this area and would have witnessed this degrading spectacle.

32:26-28 — Not all of the Israelites participated in this godless orgy. This is obvious from Moses' question and the response of the Levites.

32:29 — This statement is addressed to the Levites. God's intent to set them apart for temple service was not yet revealed to them but by this act they proved themselves worthy of this blessing.

B. Moses Prays for Israel — 32:30-35

32:30 — "Peradventure I shall make atonement for your sin" - Moses recognized the awfulness of Israel's sin and did not presume upon God's mercy, but promised that he would plead on their behalf. Moses again demonstrates himself to be a very compassionate leader.

32:32 — "If you will forgive their sin ——." The elipsis implies the conclusion "well" or "I will be satisfied." Moses goes on to say that if God is not willing to forgive, he would be willing to be blotted out of the "book." This book is probably a record of all living souls and implies physical death, not spiritual death. Sentiments of this notable character were also expressed by the apostle Paul (Rom 9:3).

32:33-35 — God responded with His universal principle of personal responsibility for sin (Ezk 18:4). God promised to spare them without sacrifice on this occasion, but added that He would afflict them later. Already by the time Moses wrote this account he was able to add that God did indeed plague them for their idolatry (v. 35).

III. Repentance — 33:1-11

33:1-2 — The entire covenant had fallen when Israel violated it. It was God's prerogative to retract or renew whatever portions and to whatever degree He

deemed. By an act of pure grace, God renewed His pledge to drive out the Canaanites and allow Israel to possess their land.

33:3 — Israel had shown herself to be unfit for God's presence so He determined to withdraw Himself from their midst. His declared intent was for their own protection; lest their faithless conduct excite His holy wrath to their destruction.

33:4 — Once Israel had lost the privilege of divine company, they finally awakened to its value. Mourning the loss of God's close presence, they stopped wearing their ornaments. This action may have been a customary symbol of grief but probably had more significant connotation. What they put away may have been amulets or other cultic fetishes. At best they were ashamed to wear in God's presence jewelry similar to that which had been used in making the golden calf. While mourning was a sign of sorrow, the putting away of jewelry was an outward manifestation of repentance.

33:5 — "Put off your ornaments from you" - Literally, "lay aside" your ornaments altogether. They had already taken them off but the continual disuse of them was to serve as a token of their sincere repentance.

33:6 — At the time Moses wrote this account he was able to say that Israel did strip themselves of these ornaments "by Mount Horeb," literally, "from Mount Horeb." In other words, from the time that they were commanded by Mount Horeb and onward, they continued to lay aside these things.

33:7 — "Moses took the tabernacle" - The tabernacle proper had not yet been built, although the plans for its construction had been given to Moses. This was possibly Moses' own tent which doubled as a tent of meeting or a temporary tabernacle of some sort.

33:8-10 — Further evidence of Israel's repentance is found in their anxious attention each time Moses entered the tent of meeting. When the pillar of cloud descended and God spoke with Moses, the people all "worshipped"; literally, they "bowed themselves down" giving proper reverence to God's presence.

33:11 — "The LORD spoke unto Moses face to face" - Although God's relationship with Israel was distant, His fellowship with Moses was intimate. Elsewhere, the idea is given that God spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8). The meaning is that God did not use the indirect method, i.e., dreams, visions, etc., but communicated directly with Moses. This is a relationship enjoyed by few in the Old Testament.

IV. Reconciliation — 33:12-23

33:12 — This bold intercessory prayer is offered by Moses in response to God's statement that His presence would not go up with Israel but an angel would go instead. Since the day Moses was first commissioned in these same environs, the basis of his confidence had been God's presence (3:14; 4:12). At this point he was not willing to relinquish that leadership for the company of an unidentified angel. If an angel, why not the Angel of divine presence already promised (23:20)?

33:13 — "Consider that this nation is your people" - The selfless leader of Israel pled that God would not only favor him but also the people as a whole.

33:14 — God responded with a promise of divine presence. Note, however, that the promise is to Moses only ("thee" in the KJV shows this is a singular form in the Hebrew).

33:15 — Moses was not satisfied with just a personal guarantee, but insisted literally, "If your presence does not go, do not bring us up from here."

33:16 — "So shall we be separated" - Literally, this phrase could be translated, "so shall we be distinguished." As far as Moses was concerned, God's presence was that ultimate distinctive, which set Israel apart from all other nations, and must at all cost be retained.

33:17 — In answer to Moses' petition, God agreed to restore Israel to full covenant favor. Once again, Moses did not change God's will, but affected it. He prevailed upon God to do exactly what He purposed to do. Such a prayer brings great honor and glory to the LORD.

33:18-23 — Emboldened by the thrill of successful communion with God, Moses asked to see a full unveiling of God's glory. This prayer could not be answered on Moses' terms since no man can see God's face and live (33:20). However, God was willing, with proper precautions, to reveal as much of His glory as Moses could physically endure. This was a privilege unparalleled in human history with the possible exception of the apostle Paul who was caught up to the third heaven and heard unspeakable words which were not lawful for man to utter (2 Cor 12:4).