

# BaptistWay: A broken covenant and a fresh start

May 1, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for May 17 focuses on Exodus 32:1-19, 30-33; 33:12-17; 34:1-7.*

## God gets mad

While God was giving Moses the instructions for the tabernacle, the visual aid of God's glory and dwelling, the people of Israel were urging Moses' brother, Aaron, to make a different visual aid, a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-6). In doing so, the people expressed their doubt in God and their rejection of the covenant with God to which they just agreed (24:3, 7).

As you might expect, this made God pretty angry. God informed Moses about the people making and worshipping the golden calf, and God told Moses, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (32:10). God was angry and now wanted to fulfill the promise given to Abraham through Moses instead (v. 10).

## Moses intervenes

The *New International Version* reads: "But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God" (v. 11). Everett Fox provides a more picturesque translation in *The Five Books of Moses*: "Moshe soothed the face of YHWH his God." With the latter word choice, Fox captures the depth of the relationship between God and Moses.

First, as Brevard Childs points out in *The Book of Exodus*, by telling Moses to "leave me alone": "God himself leaves the door open for intercession. He allows himself to be persuaded." Others received ultimatums. Moses

received an open door.

Second, Moses “soothed the face of YHWH” (Fox), “sought the favor of the LORD” (NIV), “entreated the Lord” (NASB). To turn God away from anger, Moses appealed to God’s identity and promise (vv. 11-13). Moses sought to place God’s response to Israel’s idolatry in the context of God’s redemption of Israel from slavery. Would it really finish the story of the Exodus well by erasing Israel in the desert? What would Egypt say?

Even more powerful was Moses’ appeal to God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to make their descendants into a great nation. This appeal was a direct response to God telling Moses, “I will make of you a great nation” (v. 10). Later, when God told Moses to take the people and go to the promised land, God invoked the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Contained in that promise was God’s identity revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

“So, I’m supposed to go back and tell those people ‘The God of your fathers sent me?’ They’re probably going to say, ‘Well, what’s his name?’ What am I supposed to tell them?”

“Tell them I AM the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. That’s my name. It’s my name now and forever. I’m the one they’ve heard about in their family stories. They’ll remember that name. That’s how they’ll know me.” (paraphrase of Exodus 3:13-15)

## **God sighs**

According to the Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, the Hebrew word *nâcham*, rendered in the NIV as “relented” in verse 14, literally means “to sigh,” “to breathe strongly,” and has the connotation of pitying or being sorry for something. *Nâcham* also means “to comfort or console,” so when this verb appears in verse 12 as part of Moses’ plea, it confirms Moses’ attempt to persuade God away from anger.

Many struggle with the idea of God's mind changing. Some want God never to change. Others see God as wrapped up in the progress of the human race and therefore constantly changing. With these two poles, the majority in the middle are left wondering what to do with God's response to Moses' intervention. Can a human being persuade God to change?

First, Moses was not any human being. God brought Moses into a special relationship with God not enjoyed by just anyone. As part of that special relationship, God opened the door to Moses, giving Moses the right and the opportunity to intercede for Israel and thus to persuade God to act differently.

Second, to say God "relented" (NIV), "let himself be sorry concerning the evil that he had spoken of doing to his people" (Fox), "changed his mind" (Childs) is not to say God is indecisive or that God's very nature changes. Indeed, the fact Moses was able to persuade God into relenting from destroying Israel points to the constancy of God's mercy and grace. Rather than being an occasion for worry or doubt, I see God's decision to relent as cause for rejoicing in God's commitment to love.

Third, although God relented, God did not intend to let Israel off the hook. Moses returned to the people as instructed, and upon seeing their revelry around the golden calf, he enacted God's anger in a picturesque display by smashing the stone tablets containing God's written covenant with Israel (v. 19). Moses then commanded the Levites to kill those we can presume were unfaithful (although the text does not explicitly state this), and 3,000 were killed (vv. 27-28).

In addition, God sent a plague on Israel to punish them as a direct response for making and worshipping the golden calf (vv. 33-35). God may have relented from the original plan, but God still punished Israel for its sin, despite a second (and drastic) attempt by Moses to intervene for them (vv. 30-32).