

Explore the Bible: Rebellion

October 4, 2017

- The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 22 focuses on Exodus 32:1-6, 11-14.

This famous episode involving the people of Israel and the golden calf is an obvious concern for the reader. We often ask: *Why would they do this after they encountered God at Sinai?* Perhaps there is a better question: *Did they really think God would not respond?*

The first commandment given in Exodus 20 forbade them to create any other gods. God's jealousy for worship is evident, just as the people's ease to forget. We are not much different today.

We should not approach Israel any more harshly than we should our own forgetfulness. Be prepared to confront your own rebellion toward God when you put anything before him. *Do you really think God will not respond to your rebellion?*

Rebellion

When expectations are shorted, it is human inclination to worry, react and take matters into one's own hands. Moses was both the leader and direct intercessor between the people and their God. Now the people were in distress because of the absence of Moses, which led them to seize control.

The people of Israel had seen the gods the Egyptians worshipped, and they desired something they could see, as well. Their rebellion led them to wanting what they knew. The calf was a common image. Peter E. Enns notes, "the ancients did not equate an idol with the god, but (as an) earthly representation of that god" (Enns, *Exodus*, 569). *Where do our rebellions*

lead us— to something familiar or not?

Aaron submitted to the people, taking their gold that could have been reserved for the Tent of Meeting, and casting the image that they would claim to be their delivering god. This is congregational mutiny! *Dare we ask how we have seen congregational mutiny in our experience?*

We must see rebellion as a human tendency God will not tolerate. No one is immune to this desire to take charge and accomplish one's desire. *How could we prevent our own rebellion? Where do I see myself in this story?*

Sin committed

Sin is a perversion of God's plan. Falling short of perfection is an understatement as the meaning of "festival" is completely maligned by the people. "Throughout Exodus, we read the refrain that Israel is to leave Egypt to hold a festival to the Lord ... but the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai turn it into something else" (Enns, *Exodus*, 571).

Everything God was to receive was handed over to a human-made, breathless piece of wood covered by gold. The people were all too willing to rise early and make sacrifices followed by a meal and drinking. This was an all-out celebration for an imposter.

Are all types of sin this way? When we commit sin, we are giving what God deserves to something or someone undeserving. There is no doubt the people are guilty of this sin; it was their choice. The same is true when we sin. The one who commits the sin is guilty. Ask your group, How have I knowingly and unknowingly given others what I should have given God?

Appeal for grace

Please *do not* pass over verses 7-10. The anger and fury that burned in God must be read and responded to. Such rebellion seemed to inspire a revised plan to start anew with Moses as the father of a nation. One may easily see God's desire here in comparison to his decision to flood the earth in Noah's time.

Rather than seeking his own gain, Moses' heart for the people and God's plan convinced him to be the ambassador between the two at conflict. Moses was the only Israelite who acknowledged God as the deliverer here, and he gave a compelling argument for God's name and God's people.

That God "relented" or "changed his mind" speaks to both Moses' counsel and God's decision. Intercession does actually cause change in how we experience God's plan. Nahum Sarna offers this translation: "And the Lord renounced the punishment he had planned to bring upon his people" (Sarna, *Exodus*, 206).

How do we hold in tension that "God changed his mind" and "God does not change"? This may seem contradictory, but we should see it as a paradox. Even more important is the opportunity for mercy, where God not only spared the people of his wrath, but additionally allowed grace to keep them as his people.

Discuss this: *My rebellion can be overcome by God's mercy and grace.*

Conclusion

So much transpires following our text that we should encourage our group to continue reading on their own through Exodus 34. Israel has to account for their rebellion in light of God's mercy and grace. God shows himself to the people and begins to meet with them.

How do we go beyond this story? Rather than stop at the act of rebellion, we should notice the consequences, as well as the opportunities to learn from rebellion. We must agree God desires to also move beyond such stories to the perfectly restored relationship he designed between himself and humankind.

Acknowledge that today we have an affinity for “rebels,” from the Star Wars films to seeing modern and historical “heroes” who go against the grain of society for a cause. When it comes to God though, rebelling against his desire for our worship is by no means a good aspiration.

As followers of Christ, we are “rebels” who sing the hymn, “The world behind me, the cross before me” as we walk through this life under God’s leadership. We have much to learn about ourselves through our predecessors, and we have much to do as we make certain we are not going against the One who delivered us.

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