

Revelation Through Failure Exodus 32-34

We have two more weeks in Exodus and today we come to a striking incident in the early history of the people of Israel where they fail big time. We've seen throughout the book of Exodus that God was moving in the world, making himself known to mankind who had turned from him and forgotten him. And to do that he chose to reveal himself through the nation of Israel whom he delivered out of slavery in Egypt and would bring to the promised land of Canaan where they would be a light to the surrounding nations, revealing his glory on earth. When he entered into a covenant with them he said: *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* Through their priestly ministry and holiness they would reveal his glory to the world.

But what would happen if they failed? What would happen if they broke the covenant and sinned? Would that destroy God's purpose and plans for them? Did God need them to be perfect? We're going to see today that the Israelites were not perfect people – in fact, they were far from perfect. Could God still carry out his purposes and reveal his glory through them?

And what about us? God calls us to be holy so we reveal his glory to the people around us, but what about when we fail? When we look at our lives we probably don't need to look too deeply to see our imperfections and times when we've fallen into sin. Can God still use us? Can he reveal himself through us in spite of our failures? That's what I want us to look for this morning as we look at the failure of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.

We finished a lengthy section of this book a couple weeks ago where Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving detailed instructions about how to build a Tabernacle and all the objects inside, including the clothing of the high priest. This Tabernacle was the place where God would come to dwell in the midst of his people so he could bless them and reveal himself to them and through them. While receiving these instructions Moses was gone for 40 days and nights and the people started to think he'd never come back. And as time went on, their thoughts went back to what they used to do in Egypt, and they were tempted.

Read Exodus 32:1-6.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord." ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

God had made it very clear in the terms of the covenant he had just made with them that the worship of idols was strictly forbidden. All the other nations worshipped idols, and the Israelites did too when they were back in Egypt, but they were to do so no longer. That was one of the primary ways they would be different than the other nations and reveal that Yahweh was different than any other god.

Yet when Moses didn't come down from the mountain for a few weeks, they quickly turned right back to idol worship. And not just any idol, but an idol made to look like a calf. In Egypt they worshipped the god Apis, the bull, who was a god of fertility. So this idol was likely in line with that kind of worship – worship that included feasting, drinking, and "rising up to play" or "revelry." According to the Reformation Study Bible this was probably a fertility cult orgy. Rampant sexual immorality. Even Aaron, the next in command after Moses was involved and instrumental in carrying out the wickedness of that day.

So this was the first time they broke the covenant and it was done so in a very offensive way. They failed big time. Now what? What would God do with them? How could they go on after that? Could he still use them to carry out his plans and purposes? Could he still reveal his glory through a sinful people? I want to walk us through the next couple of chapters so we can see what happens.

Read Exodus 32:7-10.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

They had broken the covenant, they had broken their relationship with Yahweh, and earned the sentence of death. You might remember when they entered the covenant, Moses sacrificed peace offerings to the Lord and took the blood of the sacrifices and poured it out over the people to signify that they were making a blood oath and to break the covenant would mean death. So by worshipping the golden calf, they earned the sentence of death. And God told Moses he would consume them in his wrath and start over with Moses' family.

You can imagine this was all a big shock to Moses. He had given up his quiet life in Midian to lead the people out of Egypt. He had seen God do all kinds of miraculous things to set them free and bring them safely to Mt. Sinai. He knew of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of God's plans to bring them to Canaan and reveal himself to the world through Israel. And now, if God destroyed them, it would have all been a waste. So Moses was shocked and this is how he responded.

Read Exodus 32:11-14.

But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will

give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.”¹⁴ And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

So Moses pleaded with the Lord and he relented. He didn't destroy them like they deserved. So at this point in the story, your theology and thoughts about God begin to be tested. This brings up all kinds of questions or can lead to all kinds of different assumptions. The way this story sounds is that God is unstable and changing and prone to major mood swings based on human behavior – whether that be the sinfulness of the people or the pleading of Moses. It also makes it sound like Moses had to talk sense into him and remind him of promises he made that he apparently forgot in his anger. Is that what's going on here?

I don't think so. That doesn't match up with the way God is revealed throughout Scripture. If God was like that, we should be terrified. But the Bible shows us that God is stable and unchanging. He never forgets and doesn't need to be reminded of things he's promised. He is sovereign and in control and carrying out his plans and purposes with full capability. So I think we need to interpret this in a different way.

I think God is purposefully using this terrible situation to reveal things about himself to Moses that could most clearly be seen through Israel's failure. We've already seen that God is just and that disobedience to him evokes his wrath. But here we see that he also raises up, listens to, and uses intercessors to stay his wrath, and that he is not only a God of justice and wrath, but also a God of patience and mercy. They deserved to die, but God chose to spare them.

At this point in the story, I think Moses didn't understand the seriousness of the sin and rebellion that was going on in the camp. He was pleading for God to withhold his wrath, but when he went down from the mountain and actually saw what was going on, his attitude changed abruptly.

Read Exodus 32:15-20.

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written.¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in

the camp.”¹⁸ But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.”¹⁹ And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.²⁰ He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

So when Moses actually saw what the people were doing, he was filled with burning anger. Their sin was atrocious and they were deserving of destruction. So he smashed the tablets in a public declaration of how they had broken the covenant. He pulverized the golden calf and made the people drink the powder, which I think was a demonstration of their guilt and deserved condemnation. He went on in his wrath to confront his brother for leading the people into sin. And then he released the men from the tribe of Levi to go out among the people and kill those who were likely still engaging in their idolatrous, immoral behavior. So he did the very things which he pleaded with God not to do while he was still up on the mountain. This shows me that he came to see that God's wrath for their sin was very just. They deserved to die for breaking the covenant.

So that was a terrible day for Moses and the people of Israel. I'm sure everyone was deeply shaken and didn't know what was going to happen or what to do next. Yahweh had not destroyed them, but it was clear that he was very angry. So the next day Moses went back up to the mountain to speak with God to see what would happen next.

Read Exodus 32:30-33:3.

³⁰ The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”³¹ So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold.³² But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”³³ But the Lord said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”

³⁵ Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

¹ The Lord said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

So God would keep his promises to bring the people to the land of Canaan and he would drive out the pagan nations before them, but he would not go with them, he would send an angel instead. Furthermore, even though he withheld the immediate punishment they deserved, he would visit their sin upon them at a later time. There would be a day of judgment when all who sinned against him would receive condemnation. When Moses told the people these things, they were very dismayed.

Read Exodus 33:4-6.

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. ⁵ For the Lord had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” ⁶ Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

The people were filled with remorse and here we see they actually repented – at least in the sense that they humbled themselves before God and stripped off the celebrative ornaments that accompanied their idol worship. It was a visible sign of confession and acknowledgement of guilt and desperation. They could see the grave consequences of losing the presence of God. They had seen his mighty works in Egypt and how he led and protected them by the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They saw how his presence with them made them distinct from every other nation. But now, because of their sin, that would all be lost. If Yahweh removed his presence and sent only an angel instead, it would be a monumental loss for them. So they mourned and repented.

And I think this is very significant. We've seen things about God in this story and how he responds to blatant sin – there's a perfect divergence of justice and wrath along with patience, mercy, and faithfulness. But how would he respond to the remorse and contrition of the people? Would that make any difference?

As the story continues it seems like days passed and during that time Moses didn't go up on the mountain, but he did go to a special tent he set up far outside the camp to meet with God. And the people watched and worshipped whenever that happened. They didn't know what was going to happen and they were waiting. If Yahweh didn't go with them, their hope was lost. But one day here's what happened when Moses met with God.

Read Exodus 33:12-20.

Moses said to the Lord, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'¹³ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."¹⁴ And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here."¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

¹⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory."¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

So Moses has this very personal conversation with God where he pleads with him to reveal his plans and his ways and his glory. And in that conversation with all the events that led up to it, including the repentance of the people we see an amazing response from God. He tells Moses he would once again go with them and take them to the promised land. I don't understand everything that's happening in this passage, but I do believe that the repentance of the people and the faithful

intercession of Moses moved God's heart and there was restoration. They could now move on from their failure. Even though Israel had broken the covenant and deserved immediate destruction, God was going to renew the covenant and lead them onward. And that's what we see in the last few verses. This passage gives us an awesome summary of how God reveals himself through us, even when we fail.

Read Exodus 34:1-10.

The Lord said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. ⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." ⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. ⁹ And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

¹⁰ And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Can God carry out his plans and purposes and reveal his glory through his people even when they fail miserably? I hope this account helps you to see how that's possible. I just love the way God reveals himself at the end of this story. He shows us that he's merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

God is perfectly just and will punish sin, but he is also perfect in mercy and will show patience and forgiveness to those who repent. He did that back then and he does that now because of the awesome sacrifice of Christ. Romans 3:23-26: *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

We know that Christ has come and died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the guilty, so for those who turn to him in faith and repentance, he took the punishment and death we deserved so that we won't have to face judgment and condemnation. So Christ is the way that the guilty will be forgiven. And it is clear that God can use us, imperfect though we may be. He calls us to live holy lives to reveal his glory, but even when we fail he is able to carry out his plans and purposes.

I hope that sinks in for you today and gives you hope and fills you with love for God. And having experienced that grace and mercy and steadfast love in your life, now go and demonstrate that to others who may sin against you that they might turn to God and live.