

Title: Unresolved  
Text: Exodus 32.7-35  
Theme: Atonement vs. Justice  
Series: Exodus #49  
Prop Stmtnt How can God not destroy the people he has sworn to care for?

The chapter before us in many ways captures one of the major themes of the Bible. How can this God, so infinite in his righteousness, so perfect in his justice, so terrifying in his response to sin be at the same time merciful, kind and gracious? How can it be? It is a huge problem that at face value bends under the strain of this seemingly infinite tension. This chapter is given to us because we need to feel this tension. The question of – will God forgive us, only masks an even deeper one and that is – How can God forgive us? How can God forgive us, when we have done such violence to his peace? How can God forgive us when we have so abruptly, so arrogantly, so plainly and so intentionally have rejected his commands? How can God forgive us when we have scorned his love? What payment could possibly be given that would ever repair such damage that we have done? That is the weight that we must feel. That is the strain that Moses understood. That is the issue that the children of Israel were so myopically ignorant of, so calloused to, so indifferent to, and so dismissive of. In their flippant rejection of the law of God they were completely unaware that they were so close to complete annihilation and that the only thing that saved them, was the man Moses, whom they had just thrown under the bus, was pleading on their behalf. So, even as we read the text this morning; read it, hear it, taste it, feel it not as a casual observer of history, but as one whose own life is justly condemned were it not for the intercession of one infinitely more righteous than yourself. Look for and feel the emotion of this chapter. While chapters 5, 14, 16 and 17 are all intense chapters with great drama that take us on great emotional swings, this chapter is just as intense, perhaps more so, but here, the tension is unresolved. This tension is reflected in the statement that Moses makes in v.30. And this tension remains unresolved as the chapter comes to an end.

Read Text:

This message has four parts: Overview, outline, bam-points and Christ.

### Overview

The text before us, is mostly dialogue with some connective narrative. There are 22 verses of dialogue and 7 verses of narration. The LORD speaks at the beginning and the end and is quoted by Moses in the middle. Moses and the LORD do most of the talking, while Aaron talks a bit and Joshua speaks a bit.

These conversations reveal a series of conflicts: In fact the chapter begins with a conflict between Aaron and the people. Our text picks up with a conflict between the Lord and Moses because the LORD has a conflict with the people. Then Moses is wrestling with the LORD, and then Moses is confronting Aaron and then the people and then finally is going back to the LORD. These conversations reveal so much that we need to consider. The flow of the chapter is based on two scenes: 1) On the mountain (7-14) where we

have A) The LORD's Response (7-10), Moses' Prayer (11-13), and The LORD's response (14) and then 2) In the Camp (15-35) where we have A) Moses' Response (15-29) B) Moses Prayer (31-32) and the LORD's Response (33-35). Verse 30 is both a transitional verse and a pivotal verse, capturing, in my estimation the theme and the tension of the whole scene.

### Outline

#### 1. On the Mountain (7-14)

##### a. **The LORD's Response** (7-10)

The words of the LORD reveal his anger. Verses 7-9 are not idle threats. God does not say these things to simply scare people into submission. God never says things for drama sake. God is righteously angry. His law has been broken. His covenant has been rejected. His people have blatantly rejected him and have called him a cow! It's like a telling your 16-year old kid who just got his license. "Do not talk on your cell phone and drive at the same time, or I will take away your license, your phone, and your car. Do not, do not, do not!! – got it? Yea, yea, yea, only to see him pull out of the drive, and get 3 houses down the street and pull out his phone!!! When you confront him – it's like – what? – It was ringing – I had to answer it! As serious as you are about that, this is thousands of time more serious and Moses knows it. In fact, the words of the LORD (7-10) are like short, staccato, terse verbal blasts from God in response to the previous section (verses 1-6) which just concluded with the phrase, "Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." Now Yahweh describes what the people are doing (7-8) and then what he is going to do (9-10) and does so in these short statements that has a crescendo affect which only illustrates the building anger of God. Moses realizes quickly that the people are in imminent danger. So, even before he attempts to see what the people were doing, he first stops and pleads with God. He realizes that there is not a second to lose. God's anger is aroused and he is about to pour it out upon these people. However, when God says, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them..." he is leaving open a door, isn't he? He is holding out the possibility of his wrath being averted, which is exactly how Moses interpreted it. God says to leave him alone so that he can carry out his justice. But, if I don't leave him alone, then perhaps he will change his mind. So, verse 11 begins with a "hold the phone" this ain't over yet moment. "But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God."

##### b. **The Prayer of Moses** (11-13)

It's actually a bit surreal. The people in the camp have no idea how close to destruction they are. They are woefully ignorant of the reality that at that very moment, Moses was standing in the gap for these people. The prayer of Moses is worth a protracted study because it is such a powerful example of how to boldly approach God. Moses makes his appeal based on 4 things:

- 1) Look at what you have already done.
- 2) Look at what your enemies will think of you

- 3) These are your people, have pity on them
- 4) You made a promise to Abraham

Was this enough? Would it work? What was going to happen?

c. **The LORD's response** (14)

God, at that moment chose to withhold his judgment. The text makes it clear that Moses realizes that this is just a reprieve for the time being and not a complete forgiveness and cleansing. The only thing that has happened is that Moses is given a window of time to address this problem. He wastes no time.

2. **In the Camp** (15-35)

a. **Moses's Response** (15-29)

We learn in vs. 15-16 that the law was inscribed by God himself upon two tablets, both on the front and the back. After a brief conversation with Joshua about what to make of the noise in the camp (presumably part-way down the mountain [see 24.13] – where it appears that Joshua, unlike the people below waited patiently for the 40 days), Moses continues his descent to the camp where he is appalled at what he sees. Now, it is Moses who is angry. Verses 19-20 describe a series of verbs that make it very clear that this is a serious problem. Notice them, “approached, saw, anger burned, threw, breaking, took, burned, ground, scattered, made the Israelites drink it.”

You can tell a lot about a person's character by observing what they get angry about. What do you get angry about? Do you get more upset about your fantasy football team losing than you do about sin? Do you get more angry about not eating on time or your car getting a scratch in it than you do about the honor of God in the land, or the coldness of your own heart in worship? Some of you express more emotion when you miss a birdie putt than you do when sing or pray. Some of your prayers are so lifeless and so predictable and so monotonous, that it sounds like you are talking to a garage. Going to church is a strain on you. Singing the praises of God with the people of God is a bore to you. You have no passion, no fire, no zeal for God because you have no hatred of sin. If you had any clue about the war that is raging around you, then when we are called together to worship, you would be all in and all ready. If we really knew what was at stake, ushers would not hand out bulletins, but instead would give out seat belts and helmets. Your children learn about how authentic your faith is by watching what really winds you up. Some of you need to get wound up. Some of you don't get wound up because your heart is not engaged in the battle. You do not realize what is at stake. You do not see the urgency of the situation caused by idolatry. Look, if your children are bowing down at the idols of popularity, if your home is bowing down to the gods of consumerism and cultural accommodation – wake up!! Get off the couch and get on your knees. Serious sin demands a serious response and we are in the midst of serious sin. Moses knew it and Moses responded! What about you?! So, he breaks the tablets (upon which is written the terms of the covenant) which symbolizes the fact that the people

have already broken the covenant. He destroys the idol. Thank-God for someone who will stand up and say – this is wrong. This is not who we are. This is not what we do. He grinds it into powder, scatters it on the water and makes the people drink it. You want this idol? You want to become one with this idol? Make no mistake, that is what idolatry is about. I want to find something with which I can be identified, instead of God. It's like Moses is saying, ok, if that is what you want, you can have it.

Next comes the confrontation with Aaron. The contrast between Moses and Aaron could not be more clear. Moses is a man of action, Aaron is a man of excuses. Moses leads, Aaron follows. Aaron's response is so pathetic, it makes you want to say, "hey Aaron, just man-up buddy and face the music. You blew it, now just admit it. Instead, he comes up with this laughable line about throwing gold into the fire and a cow jumped out. Walter Kaiser wondered if perhaps Aaron was trying to make it sound like some sort of miracle took place in an effort to divert the responsibility from off of himself. Like the chapter itself, this encounter is left unresolved. Moses has to address a greater problem. The people were running wild. Aaron the follower had allowed them to become a source of mockery to their enemies. These people of God, were, no different than anyone else after all – were they? Does that not just bring intense grief to your soul? Do you not just want to stop and weep when you see and hear of the people of God who act just like those who make no claim to Christ? Even amongst the "people of God", Moses has to stand up for God. It is a sad but necessary reality. Even within the people of God, if someone does not stand up for God, there will be no people of God.

Now, we are confronted with the seriousness of this. Moses, calls for those who are loyal to the LORD to come and stand with him. The Levites rally to him, but there is a responsibility that comes with this. Moses, speaking to them the word of the Lord commands them to put on a sword and to kill those who were worshiping the calf.

There is no middle ground. You cannot be neutral about God. The Levites responded as they were told. It was a day of death and judgment. Either you deal with sin, or sin will deal with you because God will deal with sin. That day about 3,000 people died. Let me ask you a difficult question. V. 27, says that the LORD, the God of Israel told these men to do this. Therefore, was this the right thing for these guys to do? Of course it was. But doing the right thing is not always the easy thing. Instinctively we read this and we double-clutch. Whoa, I don't know about that? Why not? Does it offend you? It is not the punishment of sin that should cause us to question the morality of God, but his failure to do so. If God said that sin (and idolatry in particular) was terrible, but then did nothing about it, we should rightfully conclude that God is a liar. It is the action of God in response to sin that gives us reason to trust him. He means what he says! And those, like the Levites who believe him and act upon it, are known by God.

There are times when we, as the church, the new covenant people of God are called to deal with sin in our camp. It is called church discipline. It is not enjoyable, but it is necessary. If we did not do this, then our children and this world, and especially those members of our church who were caught up in sin would have every right to question the

integrity of our beliefs or the legitimacy of the gospel itself. It is not our response to sin that should cause you to question the love of the church, but our failure to do so.

The sun finally set on one of the worst days in the history of Israel. What had just happened? How did they get to this point? They had so many evidences of God's power and grace and love and care for them, now it appears that they may have thrown it all away. God couldn't come and live with these people now, could he? How would they ever get over this? Brother had to kill brother. This was awful. The next day, the words of Moses were few, but heavy. Their sin was great. Their sin was so great that Moses did not know if atonement was possible. Moses knew something that many of these people did not consider. Moses knew something that some of you do not even realize. You can't live without atonement. If you do not have a covering, a sufficient payment for your sin, you will be destroyed by the just and righteous wrath of God. And Moses did not know if there was a payment that was big enough for this. It is as if Moses is saying, "I don't know yet, if this will work." So Moses prays.

**b. Moses' Prayer (31-32)**

Here is where I am humbled and grateful and convicted by Moses. These people, including his own brother have just about destroyed every sacrifice he has made for them, every dream he has had for them, every work that he has done for them. He has put up with their lack of belief, their whining, and their complaints and has over and over been vindicated by God in their presence, only to have them do this! It is astounding. But, at this point, he fights for them. Moses wants for these people something more than what they want for themselves. He knows the life they can have in glad surrender to God and he is willing to fight for that for them, even though they don't appreciate it. His prayer is simple. He confesses their sin, pleads for forgiveness and then offers a sacrifice. He offers the greatest thing that he can think of, he offers himself. What is God going to do?

**c. The LORD's Response (33-35)**

We don't know. God does not accept Moses' offer, though his prayer does seem to affect at least a delay in the execution of the sentence to some extent. Israel's position as God's chosen people is clearly at stake and at the end of this chapter she is left hanging in the balance. God is still going to punish their sin, but for now, Moses has to lead these people to the land. But the joy is gone. And the chapter concludes with a plague that breaks out among the people. The consequences of their sin linger for a long time in their midst. We come to the end of the chapter. Some people have died and others are dying, and the LORD has promised future punishment. It all stands for the moment, unresolved.

**Bam-Points**

Before we, in our hearts, condemn the children of Israel we need to stop and consider.

**1. Idolatry is close to the surface of every one of our hearts.**

Our hearts are an idol producing factory. Every day we are manufacturing things and ideas that we are prone to worship instead of that which truly matters.

## **2. God cannot tolerate false worship**

God is so serious about your joy, that he will not let you get away with trying to pursue it in a way that will destroy you. His judgment is a mercy that is intended to drive you to finding your complete satisfaction in him. Because idolatry is an ongoing battle and because God cannot tolerate false worship...

## **3. If you don't kill sin, sin will kill you.**

Serious sin demands a serious response. You cannot be neutral about sin.

## **4. You become what you worship either for destruction or restoration.**

Just like the calf, the people were “stiff-necked” (v.9), “running wild” (v.25), “quick to go their own way” (v.8), and had to be herded together or rounded up. And then just as the calf was destroyed, so were those who worshiped it. If you worship an idol you will share in its destruction. And all idols will be destroyed. This chapter is difficult to preach and hard to bear. I am so grateful that the Bible does not end here – unresolved. The unanswered question and the intercession of and yet the inability of Moses to provide a necessary sacrifice all point to our need of Christ.

### **Christ**

No, it is not the punishment of sin that should cause us to question the morality of God, but his failure to do so. But how then can his righteous anger and his tender mercies be reconciled? How then can God who is perfectly just unleash his infinite grace? Moses had a problem that he could not solve. Moses was the representative of a people who rightly deserved the wrath of God and Moses knew it. So, he offered up all that he had – himself. And it was NOT good enough. And that my friends, is called “works righteousness” – and it does not work. Your best morality, your best intentions, your best promises, your best law-keeping, is not good enough. If you would stand before God all by yourself to give an account of the sin in your life, (that is the idols of your heart) you would have no hope. Unless you have a Savior, unless you can find an atonement, you are without hope. That is why with such irrepressible joy and unshakeable confidence, I point you to Christ. What Moses wanted to do, but could not do, Christ did. Christ lived a perfectly righteous life and then offered his life up in your place when he went to the cross. His death absorbed the just and righteous wrath of God. In his death, the wrath of God was satisfied. In his death, the mercy of God, like a mighty ocean was set free. Come, run to this ocean. Let the waves of God's grace pound your sin-condemned soul. His death on the cross spelled the death of your death for your sins. He took what you could not bear, and paid your debt that he did not owe, so that you could be declared righteous with a righteousness that you did not earn. I implore you to confess to God that you are a sinner and in so doing abandon all trust in self-righteousness and self-confidence and turn from your sin, and cast yourself completely upon Christ for pardon and peace. This same God who promised judgment to the unrepentant is the same God who promises pardon to the humble. He always means what He says.