

The High Price of Sin

Exodus 32:1-33:6

On our recent holiday I watched a 5-part TV mini-series called *Chernobyl*.
It's a dramatization of the 1986 nuclear accident
that happened in Ukraine when it was part of the Soviet Union.

I have a very faint memories of the news reports back in 1986.
I was 8 years of age when the accident occurred
and I remember seeing on the news a report of the soviet firemen
running out on the reactor's roof removing debris;
they only had a few seconds each to do the job because of the radiation.
That moment is dramatized in the series.
They coerced over 3000 men to do that job, 90 seconds each.

One question that the characters ask in the series
is how the reactor could have exploded in the first place.
The answer in part, is that there was a design flaw.
The control rods were made of partly of graphite instead of full boron,
and that design difference proved to be catastrophic.

Why did they change the design of the control rods? Because it was cheaper.
The Soviets wanted to save costs,
so they made a short cut, they didn't do things properly,
and the price of this short cut was astronomical.

In Ch 32 of Exodus, the Israelites decide to cut corners,
they decide that they're not going to do things properly,
and the price is a costly one.

It one of the classic bible stories
demonstrating the danger of taking short cuts with God,
the danger of ignoring the instructions he's left us with.
As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:6, these events in Exodus
occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.
So it's time for us to watch and learn, lest we make a catastrophe of our own.

The opening verse of ch 32 involves a shift in scenery.
Since ch 24, the story has been with Moses and Joshua on top on Mt Sinai
as Moses receives instructions concerning the building of the tabernacle.
The last thing he said to the elders before going back up the mountain
was Wait here for us until we come back to you. *Wait*.
And then we're told that Moses and Joshua were up there 40 days and nights.

And so it was probably after a month or so had passed
when our attention shifts to the bottom of the mountain

and we hear the impatience of the Israelites: Ch 32:1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

The sin here at the foot of the mountain comes in three parts.

First of all we see a rejection of God's appointed servant.

This was always a temptation that was before the Israelites.

Remember when Moses first tried his hand at being a savior

the man who was arguing with his fellow Israelite said to Moses

"Who made you ruler over us?" And then at the Red Sea they raised their

voices against Moses: "What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?"

And here it is again. *Moses? Forget him!*

And then they reject God's gracious gifts, verse 2:

Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf...

Where did the Israelites get this jewelry from? Would anyone like to guess?

You remember on the night they fled

they asked their Egyptian masters for items of gold and silver,

and God made the Egyptians favorably disposed towards them?

God allowed the Israelites to plunder the Egyptians,

and now they're using that plunder to make a false idol;

it's a misuse of God's good gifts.

They reject God's servant, they reject God's gifts, finally they reject God's law.

The making of this idol was in direct contradiction to the 2nd commandment

That we heard in ch 20 You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Note that Aaron tries to make it clear that it's the same LORD

that's represented by this calf;

he builds an altar in front of the calf and says in verse 5

"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."

But it's not enough to obey the first commandment without the second;

God is interested in the manner of our worship as well as its direction.

So the Israelites are being careless:

They're not patiently working with their leaders,

they're using the gifts of God in the wrong way,

they're choosing to obey God halfheartedly.

There's no discipline; God's way is the hard way and they can't be bothered.

Each and every lunchtime,

I am faced with either doing things the hard way or doing things the fun way.
The fun way involves going out for a burger,
the hard way involves the discipline of eating my salad.

I remember speaking to a friend from mainland China
who was studying at university here.
I asked him what he liked about our culture and he mentioned a few things.
Then I asked him what he didn't like. The first thing he said was "I hate salad!"
And I'm like "Yes, I know!"
But life is full of these decisions, isn't it?
To eat properly, to spend properly, to work or study properly,
to engage with and honour God properly.
It's a decision that's faced by everyone and the Israelites *choose a short cut.*

So how does God respond? Not happy Aaron!
In verse 7 he calls the people *corrupt*
In verse 9 they are *stiffed-necked*,
meaning *stubborn*, always wanting to go their own way [Harvey]
And so, v10, God says he wants to destroy them and start over with Moses.

But, verse 11, we read that Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?
And then continuing at verse 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

So what's happened here? It seems as if God changes his mind, doesn't it?
He's all ready to smite the Israelites
but thank goodness for Moses and his ability to talk sense into God!

I'm not sure that God really changes his mind here.
It's a difficult passage,
but it brings together three important aspects of God's character.

First of all, this interaction with Moses teaches us that God has an emotive side.
He hates sin, it makes him angry,
and he feels like destroying those who are guilty.
God has feelings and they can run hot.

Secondly, even in the midst of his anger, God is relational
and he permits conversation between himself and those who are his servants.
And so Moses and God have an exchange about Israel's sin
and whether God should wipe them out.

But perhaps most importantly, God is faithful and trustworthy.

Did you notice what it was that Moses appealed to?

He appealed to God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
and it was on the basis of that promise that God relents.

Emotional, relational, yet faithful and trustworthy

It's a great passage which teaches us about God's *impassability*

Impassability is one of God's attributes,

and it means that God is without passions;

that is, he doesn't have *unstable* or *unpredictable* emotions.

When he does get emotional it's always in an *unsurprising* way.

If God becomes angry, it will always be directed at sin,

and yet this anger will never be so overwhelming that he breaks promises.

You know those times when you have a date booked into the diary,

—maybe 'lunch at Mum's', or 'end of year school concert'—

and then you get a better offer? 'BBQ at the Smith's place'.

What do your emotions tell you? "I don't want to go to the concert!"

You might even ask a friend "What excuse can I come up with?"

These are real feelings and thoughts, but what's the right thing to do?

The right thing to do is to keep the appointment you've written down, isn't it?

And if you were to do that every time, then you'd be impassible, just like God.

One other attribute of God is that he is a God of justice,

and so even though he stops short of unleashing total destruction,

he still arranges, through Moses, an act of discipline.

Moses and Joshua come down from the mountain

to find the people's rebellion in full swing.

They hear the singing, they see the calf and the people in rejoicing before it.

It wasn't long ago that Moses and Miriam sang with joy about the LORD,

but now the people are granting that honour to a statue of a cow.

We then have a very vivid display of righteous anger from Moses.

He breaks the tablets of the law by throwing them on the ground,

he purges the camp of this idol by breaking it down

and forcing the Israelites to drink it; that's not so much a punishment

but a means of making sure the idol was done away with once and for all,

and then he questions Aaron who comes up with the lamest excuse ever:

they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!

Verse 25 has a good summary of the situation: Moses saw that the people were running wild
and that Aaron had let them get out of control...

And so next we see the consequences of their sin descending upon them.

Verse 26 Moses stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD,
come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him. ²⁷ Then he said to them, "This is what the

LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.' "

²⁸ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died.

If we think this punishment is over the top,
then perhaps we are failing to truly comprehend what it means to reject God.
Perhaps we don't understand how wrong it is
to meet a holy and generous God with sin and selfishness.

And don't make the mistake of thinking that this is simply the Old Testament God.
At Waitara Public school they recently told us that we are free to hand out
Bibles in our Scripture classes provided it's the NT only. For some reason
they don't like the OT, but friends it's the same God, he hasn't changed.
He is still angered by sin
and the NT tells us that there is judgment yet to come.

I think Moses understood just how serious a sin the rejection of God is,
because after these 3000 people died,
he has a sense that the people still have a debt that's outstanding.
Verse 30: The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now
I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." ³¹ So Moses went back
to the LORD and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made
themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of
the book you have written."
How does Moses envisage this debt being paid?
He's going to offer his own life as a way of making amends

But God doesn't accept the offer! Verse 33 The LORD replied to Moses, "Whoever has *sinned
against me* I will blot out of my book. ³⁴ Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and
my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish
them for their sin." ³⁵ And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did
with the calf Aaron had made.

We've seen Moses act as an advocate for the people,
we've seen Moses act as a spokesperson for the people.
He is their leader and their teacher, but he cannot be their atoner.
This is where we find the limit of his leadership.

Of course there will be another leader who will come along in the future,
and he *will* be able to atone for the sin of the people,
he *will* be able to turn aside God's terrible anger regarding our sin,
and that leader, of course, will be Jesus: Jesus will become our atoner.
¹ John 2 assures us that if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—
Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

When we were on holidays we had an accident in the bathroom: we broke the sink.
One of us was moving a large glass jar,

it slipped out of the fingers and fell into the basin leaving a very large crack.

Now our initial thought was that we just added another \$1000 bucks to our holiday.
And so we told the agent what happened,
we looked at our budget to work out what to move around,
but then the agent rang back and said
“That’s ok, the owners will pay for it themselves!” WHAAAT??? Really? Yes!
No debt or price for us to pay because they’ll absorb it themselves.

And this is a picture of Christ’s work for us, isn’t it?
God taking the cost of our mess upon himself.
It’s the type of work Moses wanted to do but he couldn’t. Only Jesus could!

But in the meantime, because of his promises,
God would have to keep struggling with the Israelites.
Both parties try and get things back on track in the early verses of Ch 33
God says, “Ok, we’ll keep going to promised land,
but I’m going to keep my distance because I might destroy you!”

Upon hearing this, the Israelites, in a moment of great insight, began to mourn.
They recognize the terrible thing they have done,
and they finally start to feel the cost of their sin. They’re saddened by it.
How is it that you view your own sin?
“Ah, it’s not that serious! Yes it requires Christ’s intervention,
but only because God has a thing about it!”
Do you dismiss it, or does it make you sorrowful?
It’s a sorrow that in the end is overcome by the atonement,
but sin is a serious thing evoking serious emotions from both God and us.

As well as eating my salad, I’ve also been contemplating doing more exercise,
and so I’ve been looking at sneakers.
Some runners look amazing and when I pick them up
the prices are amazing too, amazingly high!
There is a cost to looking good while you sweat!

Friends, sin always looks good when we first start contemplating it,
but the cost is really high, so high that it took Christ’s life!
If you’re tempted, would you please put it back on the shelf.

I’ll lead us in prayer.