

Rebellion Against a Faithful God

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in an eight-part series

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Exodus 32:1–14 (NRSV)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, 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 Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a 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 proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely;⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a 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 The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Exodus 34:1–7 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke.² Be ready in 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 do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.”⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.⁵ The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “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 the thousandth generation,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

yet by no means clearing the guilty,

but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

The golden calf is the darkest moment in the story of rebellion against God.

After being saved from slavery to Pharaoh, at the foot of Mt. Sinai God's people have been taught how they should live with God and one another. They are about to begin construction of a dwelling place for their God. But, as has been their story, they choose rebellion against God even in this moment. They are impatient and restless. Moses is taking too long.

Moses dares

While Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever. So chilling was it in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,¹ they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks ago.

God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel's sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone. But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

But that isn't the end of it. The people will live but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God's holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. A foremost Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, reflects on this in his commentary:

Moses' performance in vv. 12–18 is a model for daring, insistent prayer. He prays with enormous *hutzpah*, and is prepared to crowd God in insistent ways. First, he asks to know *God's ways*. Then he insists on the *face as accompaniment*. Finally, he asks to see the *glory*. Moses refuses to let God determine the limits of asking. This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is characteristically too deferential.²

Perhaps Moses' courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God's nature. Like Moses, prayer should sustain our commitment to God and his purposes. But that prayer must be genuine and grounded in the deeply faithful relationship God desires to have with each of us, a relationship to which we can bring all our hopes and all our fears. Moses has come to know

¹ This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

² Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 942). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

something of God and is relentless in his daring appeals. Terence Fretheim expands on this for us:

Remarkably, Moses does not accede to God's request; he does not leave God alone. In fact, he speaks on behalf of the people (see Ps. 106:23; Jer. 18:20), though he has not yet seen for himself what has happened. The boldness of his reply indicates something of the nature of the relationship between God and Moses. God has so entered into this relationship that such dialogue is invited, indeed welcomed: *God is not the only one who has something important to say*. Moses' argument is stunning in its directness, but without excusing Israel in any way (cf. Num. 14:11–20). It is reminiscent of the lament psalms, particularly those designed to motivate God to act (see Ps. 13:3–4; 79:9–10). His argument is threefold; he states two matters in question form and concludes with three imperatives.

1. An appeal to *God's reasonableness*. God has only just delivered this people (Moses has the confession straight!), and so what sense does it make for God to reverse that action so quickly? The assumption on Moses' part is that God is the kind of God who will take into account factors of reason and logic in making decisions and considering options.

2. An appeal to *God's reputation*. Moses raises the concern: What will the neighbors say? A recurrent theme throughout the narrative has been that God has acted on Israel's behalf in order that the Egyptians and others might know that Yahweh is Lord (see 14:4, 18; 9:16). What would they now think, if God destroyed them (see Num. 14:13–16; Deut. 9:28; Ezek. 20:14)? Moreover, in the commandments (see at 20:7) God has shown himself to be concerned about reputation and the contexts in which the divine name is used. If God were to destroy this people, would not that place the divine purpose with respect to non-Israelite peoples, indeed God's very name, in some jeopardy?

3. A reminder of *God's own promise*—to which God has personally sworn!—to this people that their descendants would be multiplied (not killed off!) and that they would inherit the land. God has made a commitment to Israel, and would not God be following the same course as the people by going back on such a promise? It is a matter of God being true to self. Moses extends this argument somewhat beyond what God had said would be done. God had in fact promised Moses, “Of you I will make a great nation” (v. 10). Hence God does have those promises in mind. There would be a way for God to remain true to these promises in and through Moses, but that would be like starting with Abraham once again.³

So, God does not smite all the Israelites, abandoning the project begun with Abraham. Instead, remarkably, God will reveal himself to Moses, to the Israelites, to the whole world. If you want to know God, there is no better place to start than with God's self-description in Exodus 34, remembering that it follows on the heels of the Israelite's terrible sin with the golden calf.

Knowing God

Moses has persuaded God to go forward with his rebellious and ungrateful people and has even asked to see God's “glorious presence” (Exodus 33:18). Since even Moses is unholy and cannot stand before God and live, God tells Moses, in beautiful figurative language, that he will pass by Moses and protect Moses so he only sees God's back. God also writes on new stone tablets, as

³ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 285–286.

Moses broke the others in his anger over the golden calf. As God then passes by Moses, God reveals himself in seven Hebrew words (Exodus 34:6-7, above). Walter Brueggemann sketches the meaning of each term. Together, they are a staggering portrait of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son (John 3:16).

Merciful (רחום *rahûm*). Phyllis Tribble has effectively made the case that this term is related to the noun *womb* (רחם *rehem*), and thus speaks of the kind of positive inclination a mother has toward her child, a “womb-like mother-love.”

Gracious (חנון *hannûn*). This term refers to completely gratuitous positive inclination, given without cause or warrant, unmerited favor.

Slow to Anger (ארך אפים *'erek 'apayim*). The phrase literally is “long-nosed.” It apparently suggests that whatever “heat of rage” there was in Yahweh’s anger has a chance to cool off, as it must be breathed out the long nostril.

Abounding in Steadfast Love (רב־חסד *rabhesed*). Katharine Sakenfeld has shown that *hesed* refers to sustained covenantal solidarity. This formula affirms that Yahweh has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in covenantal commitment to Israel. In this context, the phrase suggests that Yahweh will “put up with” a great deal because of Yahweh’s own powerful resolve to sustain covenant, even when the partner reneges.

Faithfulness (אמת *'emet*). This term is frequently used in a pair with *hesed* and is a close synonym. It witnesses to Yahweh’s complete reliability.

Keeping Steadfast Love (*hesed*), for the thousandth generation. This formula reiterates the term *hesed* and assures that God’s *hesed* continues to operate for a long time, and for a host of subjects.

Forgiving (נשא *nāsā*). The verb literally means “lift,” which here means to relieve covenant violators of the burden of their violation.⁴

Before we leave Exodus 32-34, I need to speak about verse 7. The Hebrew word translated “visiting” or “to visit,” *padaq*, is often, and regrettably, rendered as “punish.” But it is literally “visit,” thereby helping us to see that, generally in the Old Testament, the consequences of an evil deed grow out of the deed itself, rather than being imposed from the outside, as if from God.⁵ A good example is Ezekiel 22:31, “I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads” (NRSV). There is a loosely-woven moral fabric in God’s creation. Love begets love (usually!). Violence begets violence (usually!).

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *2 Corinthians* -- ***This class will not meet this week***

⁴ Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 946–947). Nashville: Abingdon Press. I’ve abridged the comments a bit.

⁵ See Fretheim, Terence. *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Baker Academic. 2010. P. 50-51

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts* -- ***This class will not meet this week***

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: *Digging Deeper: The Tower of Babel*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.