

EXCURSIONS INTO EXODUS (VOLUME 2)

Chapter 1 Provision in the wilderness (Exodus 15:22 - 16:5 and 17:1-7)

Imagine you are tired, hungry, and your feet ache from trudging miles across the desert. Your back hurts from carrying all your pots and pans. Your head throbs from hours of being in the hot sun. Your children are exasperating. They want to run ahead with all their friends, and you are afraid of losing them in the crowd. Your sheep and the goats are getting on your nerves! They just want to stop and nibble anything that half resembles a green leaf! Your patience is exhausted and so are you! And now the sun is going down you just have to find a place to rest. On top of all this you have run out of water! Miles away from anywhere and the bottles are empty. The situation is serious. You are one of the Israelites who have just escaped from Egypt. And you start to think to yourself, ‘What did Moses think he was doing bringing us out here into the middle of the desert?’ But listen! You hear shouting up ahead! You strain your ears. People are saying it is an oasis, water at last! At the front the young men break away and run to be the first in to drink the cool refreshing water. But when they get to it they find the water is bitter, it is poisonous. Joy turns to despair.

What do you think the elders of Israel would have done at such a crisis point in their national life? WE might expect

them to gather around Moses their leader and encourage him. For example they might say, “Don’t lose heart Moses! God’s got a plan in all this. We need to ask God how he wants us to handle this situation. It’s all going to turn out for his glory and our good!” That is perhaps how we would expect it to have happened but that was not their reaction at all! The Bible spares us most of the details. Instead it gives just the briefest of comments in Exodus 15:24, “*So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’*” Note that, “*They grumbled!*” We are left to imagine the kind of thing they must have been saying. “What a stupid man Moses was. What did he bring us here for? What a crazy, incompetent, good-for-nothing leader! Didn’t he realise that the babies and the old people probably wouldn’t survive the night!” The Bible says: “*So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink!’*”

That roughly describes what happened at Marah! Leave that for a moment and come back with me to the present. We call ourselves Christians. We have come to know God. We have understood that we were under God’s judgement. But by his mercy and grace he has saved us. Now we have a new way of life. The old enemy who once enslaved us is defeated. He can never take us back again into slavery. Our life is now a life of faith.. Our creator God is almighty and he is our provider. We are Christians, we believe that! Let me repeat that statement that we really do believe God is our provider. We often declare that God’s grace is sufficient for our every need and that he will meet all our

needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. I want us seriously to ask ourselves if we really do believe that.

Well, let us return to the book of Exodus. Remember Israel sung that wonderful song of victory on the far shore of the Red Sea that is recorded in the first part of Exodus 15. Pharaoh their enemy was dead and they thanked God and were able to declare that he, in his unfailing love, would lead the people he had redeemed. They expressed tremendous confidence in the Lord. They really did mean what they sang at the time. But what a difference three days in the desert can make! Already they are grumbling. It is so easy to make great confessions of trust in God when things are going well, but not so easy when the going is tough. If we had arrived at Mara to find we could not drink the water I wonder how many of us would have sided with Moses and held a prayer meeting, and how many of us, in our anguish of spirit and fear of the crisis, would have joined the grumblers? This is very searching but also very important. The point being made is that it is possible for us to say 'God is our provider' and to say 'he will supply all we need', but then in difficult circumstances to demonstrate that we do not believe it! We demonstrate unbelief. We display that we have what the Bible terms 'hard hearts'. So the challenge from this passage today is: are we, God's New Testament people, living a life of unbelief and disobedience? In other words, how do we handle crises? Do we demonstrate that in reality we have hard hearts?

To help us we need to go back to Exodus, back at Marah. God's provision was in fact already there. Exodus 15: 25 reveals that God had prepared a piece of wood which would solve the problem. You see, Moses did what the people should have done. He cried to God for help. Then God drew his attention to this piece of wood. The Lord told him to throw it into the water and it would solve the problem. And it did. The water became sweet and fit to drink. It was a marvellous provision from the Lord, and must have strengthened the faith of all the people of Israel, or at least that is what you would expect. Let us go on just a few weeks after this episode with the water and we find the people of Israel looking longingly back to Egypt. They began to crave for the meat and the bread they had enjoyed in Egypt which now in hindsight seemed so good. Exodus 16:2-3, *"In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."* They seemed to have forgotten completely that it was the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and had provided water just those few weeks earlier. Their confidence in God seems to have completely disappeared. But what is so amazing is that God responded to them in his grace. God miraculously provided manna and quails. The Bible elsewhere describes manna as *'the food of angels'* in Psalm 78:25. God's provision was free and plentiful but it was given with two simple conditions.

- i. First, they could collect as much as they wanted for each day, but they were not to hoard it overnight.
- ii. And second, on the 6th day they could collect enough for two days but on the 7th day, they were not even to go out looking for it! They were to rely on God on a day-to-day basis. He would be faithful, and they were to obey implicitly whatever commands God gave them.

Sadly Exodus tells us that many did in fact try to hoard the manna and many did go out to collect it on the 7th day in flagrant disobedience to God's commands. They demonstrated they did not actually believe God when he said that he would provide for them day by day!

It is interesting to note what Moses said some 40 years after these desert experiences as he reflected on them just before the people entered the land of Canaan. What he says places these events into the context of what we might call 'the big picture.' Deuteronomy 8:2-5, "*Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out*

and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you." The reason for their desert experience was "... to humble them...to test them...and to teach them." Humbled by hunger and thirst to see if they would trust God. Tested to determine whether they would be obedient or disobedient to his command. And taught that God's people do not live just to feed themselves and to look after themselves, but they live to hear and respond to God's word! Now clearly Moses was looking back over the whole 40 years in the wilderness, but that 40 years started right here in Exodus 15 and 16. This was the time when they were humbled by hunger and thirst. This was where God brought them to the point of crisis before giving the provision they so desperately needed. The main lessons we are to learn from these things are to trust in God, to be devoted to obedience to him, and to live for God rather than for self. These things do not come naturally to God's people and therefore we need to pray earnestly each day for the Lord's help and grace to respond to him and our changing circumstances in a spiritual way. It is so easy for us to react unspiritually and complain as the Israelites did.

We come now to a third and similar episode in the lives of ancient Israel, and it is interesting to note the sequence of these three events recorded here in Exodus ends at a place called Massah and Meribah. And it's that place 'Massah and Meribah' that the later Bible writers name as they recall this whole period of Israel's experience. It was the

climax of the three. The problem at this particular place was that Israel demanded that God would demonstrate his power. We have moved on now to Exodus 17 and verse 7 tells us, “... *they tested the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’*” Years later the writer of the Psalms gives us the benefit of mature reflection about Israel’s failures here in the desert. And from his consideration comes a statement of reality and it shows us this was not just a problem for Israel during the Exodus! All of God’s people suffer the same weakness that Israel demonstrated. All of God’s people can have that same unbelieving and disobedient nature. Even having understood that God has rescued us from judgement and slavery a hard heart of unbelief can so easily reveal itself when we are tested. Psalm 106 was written during the period of the exile, and in verse 6 we read what the writer says to his generation of God’s people, “*We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong - and acted wickedly.*” What fathers is he talking about? Well, he makes it clear that he means the fathers who left Egypt in verses 11-14, “*The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them survived. Then they believed his promises and sang his praise. BUT they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel. In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test.*” God’s people - yes definitely God’s people - but they were failing to live a life of obedience and trust. That is our challenge! And the question we must ask ourselves is this, ‘Are we, God’s New Testament people, who understand his power, who recognise we were under his judgement, who know his

rescue through Jesus Christ, are we still living a life of unbelief?’

An important question.

Thinking about this some would want to ask, ‘Is this fair to look at the Old Testament in this way and project their experience into our own New Testament age?’ It is a very reasonable question and a good one, and in reply we must answer, ‘Yes, it is!’ We can be sure of this because that is exactly what the writer to the Hebrews does. Hebrews, of course, was written to New Testament Christians, and the book quotes large amounts of the Old Testament. It is not only quoted, but Old Testament experience is applied to the New Testament situation. For example, Hebrew 3:7-8, “*So, as the Holy Spirit says: (present tense) ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert...’*” Now that is a direct reference to the testing in the desert described in the middle section of Exodus. The actual quote is from a Psalm, but neither the writer of the Psalm nor the writer of Hebrews saw fit to change the ‘you’ of v8 to ‘they’. Hebrews 3 verse 8 says “*...do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert...’*” That means New Testament believers! He is talking about our hearts and our rebellion! The point is, we are identified with them. It is not a case of ‘they’ did it but we are better than they were. It is more the case that we are all identified together, New Testament and Old Testament people of God, them and us! So we today, as New Testament Christians are identified with the people

who rebelled in the desert. And the point Hebrews is making is that their problem is our problem too. We have an unbelieving and disobedient nature too and we must fight it! That is why Hebrews 3:12 says, *“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.”* Now it is hard to accept that we could be like that, but we will see shortly that we can and we often are! Hebrews 3:13 goes on to say that we must *“... encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.”* We slip so incredibly easily that we need to encourage one another daily to guard against an unbelieving and disobedient heart.

A searching question.

This is incredibly searching, and raises another question. How could we be in that same position as those people of Israel in the wilderness wanderings? We need to make this very personal. First we need to take a look at what it was that Israel did wrong. To begin with they failed to trust that God had their best interest in view. Having discovered the bitter water at Marah, they threw their hands up in a fit of passion “Now what are we supposed to drink!” - or words to that effect. Then they wanted a bit of their old lifestyle back. They desired the bread and meat of the old life in Egypt, even though they had been given new life and a glorious future ahead of them. Here, in transit in the desert, the slavery of their previous life in Egypt seemed more attractive than the glory of what was to come. Further, they disobeyed God's instructions. They did not

need to go back to Egypt. God gave them bread and meat from heaven, sufficient to supply all their needs. When the Lord gave them a few simple rules to follow, they chose to disobey God's instructions. And then finally, they expected, even demanded, a miracle. At Massah they exclaimed “Is God with us or not!” or to put it another way “If God is who he says he is - we expect him to do something”. They demanded a miracle! This was a tragic sequence of sinful reactions to the Lord, where faith seemed to have disappeared.

So let us update this to see what form these failings would take today. Remember the mistakes Israel made.

- i. They failed to trust that God had their best interest in view. Now, you will understand if I use a worldly phrase that is commonly spoken today. Someone might say, “You've had a ‘run of bad luck’”. Now the Bible knows no such thing as luck because God is in control of all things. But what someone means by that is that you were just getting over one bad experience when you were faced with another. Then, still struggling with the trauma of the second episode, you were faced with yet another! “They come in threes” men say with their worldly wisdom, but a fourth bad event on top! Yes, we can easily find ourselves raising our fist to God. And it really does happen that way to some people! They can go through periods of excruciating difficulty!

And we feel helpless as we watch them struggling with one crisis after another. It is just one thing after another, and if we are going through that kind of experience ourselves we get weary with all that emotional and physical pain! It's so hard then to see that God is on our side! Our circumstances are so tough, and we can get so bitter, and to confess that we trust in a God who heals us can seem more of a bad joke! At such testing times it can be very difficult to believe God is on our side. That is when we need to be so careful to guard our hearts, because we can become as unbelieving as Israel was in the desert.

- ii. Israel wanted some of their old lifestyle back. Sometimes as we observe the people in the world, they seem to get away with so much, and often have much more than we have! How easy it is for us to wish we were back there, to wish we did not have a conscience that makes us do the right thing even though it costs us, If only we did not feel we had to take the money back that the shop gave us by mistake! That extra cash could be so useful! Or if we were prepared to take a few things from our employer now and again we really could save ourselves a lot of money! After all, everybody else seems to be doing it... except us! We doggedly go on trying to give a fair day's work, while our neighbours and friends are so

resourceful in finding ways to make money by underhanded and corrupt means! But, we trust God, we live in obedience to his commands and it sometimes seems so unfair! Then it is quite easy for a little bit of us to wish we could be back there in our old life and not having to worry about conscience. And when we do react in that way we are just like the people of God in the book of Exodus.

- iii. Israel disobeyed God's instructions. It is sad to say that Christians do too, when it suits us. Have you ever heard of the homosexual Christian movement? It represents disobedience. Do we know Christians who would rather live together than formally commit to a husband-wife relationship in marriage? It is disobedience. Do we know Christians who get involved in wrong or inappropriate things because they are afraid to lose friends or afraid to make a stand? It is disobedience. Christians are capable of excusing themselves of the most extraordinary behaviour! They blatantly choose to ignore God's laws. And of course we can sin in these areas even if we do not ourselves actually do the wrong act, as Jesus taught us that even if a man looks at a woman with lust he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-30). This is why we need constantly to repent of our sin and seek the cleansing of the blood of Christ.

- iv. Israel demanded a miracle, and in so doing were arrogant and presumptuous. As we look round the Christian church today this particular sin is rife! “Almighty God - we want this person healed now. We have put our faith in you and we demand reward of our faith!” Now do not misunderstand this point. It is not wrong to ask God for special things, **but we must not demand them**. To demand is not an exercise of faith even though God may grant the request. It is to do what the prodigal son did in Luke 15. In effect he said to his father, *“Give me my inheritance - I want it now! All the blissful things you have promised that I will inherit later - I want them now. I don’t want to work in the fields - I don’t want to suffer the pain and the weariness that comes of living in your world. You have got riches God - give them to me now.”* That prodigal son did not stop being a son and the father gave him what he asked for, but it served him no purpose and he only just survived the experience that followed. It would have been much better if he had not demanded to have his inheritance before the proper time! There is a delicate balance to be held here when we pray, and I’m always amazed by the words of the man with leprosy in Matthew 8. When Jesus asked him what he wanted Jesus to do for him he said, *“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me*

clean.” There was tremendous humility as well as strong faith in this man. He believed with all his heart that the Lord could heal and cleanse him, but he did not demand a miracle. Instead he humbly submitted to whatever was the Lord’s will for him – *“Lord, if you are willing...”* That is the very thing that was lacking when the people of Israel started to demand things from God.

To help us further we must remember what we forfeit if we are disobedient and unbelieving. We give up the ‘Rest’ (capital R) that God offers us. Hebrews Chapters 3 and 4 have a lot to say about God’s Rest and it takes some hard concentration to understand it. God declared that his disobedient unbelieving Old Testament people would never enter into his Rest. God tells us concerning his New Testament people in Hebrews 4:1 *“... the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”* Now we need to understand that ‘God’s Rest’ is not a state of slovenly inertia and inactivity. The Bible tells us that God is now in his own rest, but at the same time we find him active and dynamic and tireless in his work of sustaining us and his creation. So when obedient believing Christians enter into God’s Rest it means that we are set free to serve our God in a state of joy and peace with him. In spite of our human failings we are set free to live in harmony with God and his creation. Our bodies may ache! And our lives may be difficult! But when we enter into God’s Rest we stop fighting him over it because we accept that if we did not

face hardship here we would probably want to stay and so miss out on our heavenly inheritance. Our God is not vindictive. He seeks only to prepare us for glory and heaven. So the challenge for us today is: are we, God's New Testament people who understand his power, who know we were under his judgement, who have experienced his rescue through Jesus Christ, are we living a life that demonstrates trust and obedience?

Chapter 2 Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19.1-8)

An amazing scene.

I want you to imagine a television camera panning across the landscape. All you can see are thousands and thousands of makeshift tents. Row after row after row after row. In the tents and around the tents, a seething mass people! The programme presenter has with him a panel of leading political figures. What light can they shed to explain this extraordinary spectacle? Who are these people in this remote barren place? Why are they here - miles from anywhere? How are they surviving with virtually no means of support? The world looks on in dismay and wonders what to do!

Now that is a dramatic twenty first century picture, but it was exactly like that back in the days of Moses and Exodus 19. Verses 1 and 2 read, *"In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt--on the very day--they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain."* These 2 million (or so)

people are the Old Testament children of Israel. And the place is the barren foothills of mount Sinai. They are miles from home. In fact they have no home! No fields to harvest for food, no rivers to provide water. The situation does look truly desperate! All these people living in makeshift tents, surrounded by whatever household goods they were able to carry here.

They were in this position because Almighty God brought his power to bear on Pharaoh, and after the 10th plague, Pharaoh was forced to release Israel from slavery. Pharaoh then changed his mind so God finally destroyed him and his army in the Red Sea. Israel sang a great song of victory on the far shore of the Red Sea when they realised how God had rescued them from their enemy, and we find that in Exodus chapter 15. God provided for Israel manna for bread, quails for meat, and of course water. God had performed a miraculous rescue!

An important question.

The question that still needs to be answered is, 'Why have they come here?' Now to answer that we need to go back near the beginning of Exodus when God met Moses at the burning bush. There God reintroduced himself as Moses needed reminding who God was. God explained that he is the I AM, the 'ever present' God, the God who is from eternity past to eternity future. Through what God said and through signs, he made himself known to Moses. God demonstrated his power and his command over history, and his commitment to his people. It was there that Moses

learnt, much to his astonishment, that God had chosen him to lead Israel away from slavery. Moses recorded what God had said to him on that occasion. It is in Exodus 3:12. *“God said, ‘I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God ON THIS MOUNTAIN.’”* Very significantly that is a plural ‘you’ - ‘you and the people will worship God on this mountain.’ ‘This mountain’ was Sinai. It was the very place where now in Chapter 19 we see the camp of Israel. God had said to Moses - **“You’ll be back! You and the people I am sending you to lead. You’ll be back here to worship me on this mountain!”** And that is where they were.

The reason why they have come to this place becomes clear in Exodus 19. We read in verses 3 and 4, *“Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, ‘This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’”* If we could go down into the camp and eavesdrop, we would discover that these people knew exactly why they were there! They knew precisely what was going on! Brought together by a clear and decisive act of God, they belong together, one people, God’s creation! They are bound together as a unique people with a special destiny. Remember God said in verse 4, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”* They were

there because the eternal, ever-present, all-powerful God had brought them to Sinai! So we have a unique people with a unique privilege. Exodus 19:5-6, *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* If I asked you out of all the things you possess, which one you would call your ‘treasured possession’, I wonder what the answer would be? Each of us would have our own idea. It might be an item of expensive jewellery. But it might equally be an old book, or a picture that a close friend or relative painted, or a gift that someone gave us and that holds special memories. Others might not see any value in it at all, but for us it is our treasured possession and is the last thing that we would want to lose. Well, wonderfully Israel was God’s treasured possession, and that is why we call them ‘God’s people’. They have a position of unique privilege, and this theme of God showing Israel how special they are to him is consistent throughout Exodus. Right back in Chapter 4 Israel is described as God’s *‘firstborn Son’*. For that culture a ‘firstborn son’ was very significant, a position of special privilege within the family. Then in Chapter 6 God says, *“I will take you as my own people”*. Again, a relationship of privilege. And now in chapter 19 *“... out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”*

When we stand back and consider all the things we have learned about Almighty God as we have studied Exodus, they are truly amazing! Amazing facets of God’s invisible

character have come to light. Through the events recorded in Exodus, God has found a way to reveal his invisible character to mankind! This God - I AM - is an 'ever present' God! That is amazing! A living, ever-present God, working through history right from eternity past to eternity future. And this God makes promises to men and women and keeps to them! This God is a God who rescues! What is most remarkable of all is that he focuses all his attention on men and women, the people his entire creation was made for. The Pharaoh of Egypt appeared invincible to Israel, but with God's power Israel just walked away and they left Egypt a defeated nation without even raising a single sword! Now we find this God is a God who chooses people to be his own! He makes that chosen people his treasured possession!

As wonderful as this is there is an important issue that we need to consider before we leave this subject, and it's quite a problem for some. Since we have discovered in these verses that we have a God who chooses people, I wonder if you think that is a bit odd? I wonder if you are thinking, 'Isn't this a bit unfair?' God has his little group of 'special' people, which really is tough on everybody else! You might want to add, 'That is also rather worrying because which group am I in, the special group or the other one?' To get a proper perspective we need to look a little further at these verses. In Exodus 19:5-6, God says, "*Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" Now note that carefully. "**All the earth is indeed mine**" God is saying,

"but you" - this group of people at the foot of the mountain - **"you Israel are to be a kingdom of priests!"** That is where the key to this question is found, they are to be a kingdom of priests. The purpose of the priest in Bible days was to act for the benefit of everyone else. Their purpose was to point others to God. The priest was to bear God's character to them and teach others about God through his own life and behaviour. They did this so that others would come to know God and to worship him. The whole earth is God's. That means that everyone is in fact God's possession as he created us all, but the whole earth does not know God as Israel did. Not everyone knows what God's character is like. And they do not know that the Almighty God desires them as one of his treasured possessions too! The whole world is God's, but the whole world does not have a personal relationship with him, yet they need to, they really do need to! So when God chose Israel to be "*for me a kingdom of priests*" God meant that out of all the nations this special people had been chosen to bring the knowledge of God to everyone else! They were to reflect God's character. They were to be a whole kingdom acting as priests for the benefit of the world. Back in Genesis God talked to Abraham about his descendants and he said in Genesis 12:3 that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham. So the people we see now in Exodus 19 at the foot of this mountain are Abraham's descendants, and in Genesis God's intention was to bless the whole world through Abraham's descendants.

Now returning to the problem I mentioned just now. Is it unfair that God should choose one nation as his ‘treasured possession’? Well, the fact is that God actually desires all people to come to a knowledge of himself (See 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9). God wishes that all should join in the company of his own people. Do we really think this is unfair? No, that is not unfair at all. It is an act of God’s tremendous mercy. Another thing to add to all this is that we often overlook the fact that the Old Testament people of God was not a closed society. By that we mean the Bible has many examples of Gentiles who came to realise that the God of Israel was the one true God. Indeed, even that great company that Moses led out of Egypt is described in one translation as a ‘mixed multitude’ and another states ‘many other people went with them’. So this whole company of God’s Old Testament people became ‘a kingdom of priests’.

A New Testament link.

There is a very important link here with the New Testament. The New Testament describes Christian believers as God’s people, and that includes both Jews and Gentiles. The apostle Peter, describes the disciples of Jesus like this in 1 Peter 2:9, “... *you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...*” We may well ask, as we did with Israel being a kingdom of priests, what is the purpose of Jesus’ followers being called a royal priesthood? Peter gives us the answer in the rest of that verse, “...*that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his*

wonderful light.” It is the same theme, declaring to the world how great God and his salvation in Christ really is. Peter goes on to tell us how this is to be worked out in our lives today in verse 12, “*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*”

So this is not a situation of ‘fairness’ or ‘unfairness’ that we are dealing with. People need to know God. They need to be reconciled to God, and he makes it as easy as possible to be so by ensuring that here on earth there is a group of people whose purpose for being here is to reflect his invisible character so that others come to know him. Because of that, every day, even today, more people are worshipping Almighty God for the first time. They become his treasured possession. Peter anticipated this when he wrote to believers in 1 Peter 2:10, “*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God...*” In other words, once they were not in the treasured group but now they are because they have come to God through Jesus Christ. And how did that happen? Through the witness of the lives of others who had already been reconciled to God. So, returning to Exodus 19, the people at the foot of the mountain have a unique privilege. They are God’s treasured possession.

There is one very important point we must note. Exodus 19:5 actually says, “***IF you obey me FULLY and KEEP my covenant, THEN out of all nations you will be my***

treasured possession.” You see these were very important conditions that God was laying down. God did not say now they had become his treasured possession it did not matter how they lived. Instead, the proof that they did belong to God would be seen in their complete obedience to him. The sad thing was that God actually knew these people could not keep that condition. It was impossible for them, and the problem God had to overcome at that stage was that his people did not know that. However, when God’s people heard his condition they responded in Exodus 19:8 by saying, *“We will do everything the Lord has said.”* We must say they were sincere when they said that. They really thought they could rise to God’s standards, but it was necessary for God to teach them that they could not in the remainder of Exodus. God knew that the people thought they were fine, even though he knew they were not. And really the remainder of the Old Testament is there to demonstrate what miserable failures people are. These were God’s special people, yet in no way could they match God’s standards! The point of this sad episode is to prove to us that if they could not meet God’s standard, then no one can! You can read right through the Old Testament and you will discover that it exposes the sordid truth of sinful human nature in all its ugliness! The Bible is a wonderful book ONLY because it reveals God’s mercy to us. However, the unhappy fact is that the bulk of the Old Testament and much of the New Testament does not make pleasant reading, because it reveals that human nature is wretched and fiercely resists God’s will. Our problem is

that we human beings do not want to know, and we do not want to see what the Bible makes obvious.

All is not lost and so we are going to end this chapter with the good news. Amidst the mess and the chaotic failure recorded in the Old Testament, it also describes what it calls the true Israel, the true people of God. They were people who did understand that they could not actually match God’s standards, and therefore they could not reconcile themselves to God. God simply said that when they acknowledged that and sacrificed a lamb then he freely forgave them. More relevant for us today, the New Testament also describes the true New Testament people of God. They are those who likewise acknowledge that they cannot reconcile themselves to God. God says that if we truly accept Jesus Christ as our sacrifice, we become one of God’s treasured possessions. God will never throw his treasured possessions away. The great question that we must ask ourselves is, ‘In which group am I?’

Chapter 3 God speaks to his people (Exodus 19–20a)

I wonder if you love reading. Many people do, especially those books that are family sagas and cover several generations of their characters. Indeed, in order to detail each stage of the family history some of these books come in several volumes. They can be quite fascinating reading. We might have expected Moses to write about the account of Israel’s travels from Egypt to Canaan in the same way because this was an epic journey! It started with the spectacular flight from slavery followed by forty years

during which a whole nation, some 2 million or more people, travelled in the wilderness until the journey finally ended at Jericho and entry into the Promised Land. Interestingly Exodus is not like that at all. In the Bible we do have a full account of the leaving of Egypt, and a few details of the early months of the journey, but then surprisingly little detail about the rest of the journey. What we get instead are fifty-six chapters covering a period when Israel was not going anywhere, just staying in one place for months and months camped at the foot of mount Sinai. The second half of Exodus, the whole of Leviticus and much of Numbers are given over to a description or commentary covering just eleven months standing still at Sinai! That is also without counting Moses' further commentary that takes up most of Deuteronomy. Therefore it is rather obvious that the event at Sinai must be very important indeed. In addition, whereas the rest of the Bible is written by men under God's inspiration, within these chapters we have a part of the Bible that is written by GOD'S OWN HAND! He did not dictate it! He did not even inspire men to write it! God actually wrote it himself. Within these chapters we are reading literally God's own words! God wrote them in his own handwriting on two tablets of stone. Now that really is something very, very special. Not far from the beginning of the Bible we can find words straight from his own hand to you and me. God has spoken and here we read what he said and wrote!

In the previous chapter we concentrated on just the opening words of Exodus 19. We reflected on the ways in which these people at the foot of the mountain were a unique people with a unique privilege. God's treasured possession! And it was their role to be a nation of priests, serving God and making his invisible character known to the kingdoms of the earth. Now God was about to address these unique people in person. He was going to come as close to them as he dare (for want of a better way to put it), and they were going to come as close to him as he dare let them for their own safety. So contact, as close as is possible between eternal God and his chosen people, was going to be made at the foot of Sinai. It is really rather difficult to find an earthly illustration that might signify this, but the closest I can come is when people are visited by a head of state, perhaps their president or king or queen. These are not every day occurrences and often people from the crowd try to get close enough to speak a word to them or even give a gift of, perhaps, flowers. These experiences often remain in the memory for the whole of our lives. Well, in this section of Exodus, chapters 19 and 20, GOD is coming to meet his people! And they are about to discover that God is an awesome God!

Preparation for an awesome experience.

Chapter 19 is something of a prelude because it describes a time of special preparation for this great meeting. Israel had to be as fit as was humanly possible to meet the Creator. On the third day of preparation, as the time of the great encounter drew near, Israel had to come out of the

camp and had to approach the base of the mountain. Only there, and only when all were fully prepared, would God approach the mountaintop and speak to them. It was an occasion of immense respect, with an enormous degree of reverence. A sense of the great majesty surrounded it, and all of this was designed to teach the people the awesomeness of the God of creation. Exodus 19:12-13 records God's instructions to Moses, *"Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it.'"* And the reason for this follows immediately, *"Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death! He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows..."* To experience God's immediate presence was to be a never-to-be-forgotten experience! It left such a mark that afterwards the people asked, **"Please let a mediator stand between us and God"**, and of course Moses became that mediator. The occasion was never repeated, and we are left under no illusion, that to be in God's presence requires us to tread very carefully indeed. Exodus 19:16 helps us to see how awesome this event was, *"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled."* So you can picture the scene: lightning was flashing, the noise was horrendous, and the earth beneath them was heaving. The bravest people shuddered in fear, and God had not even arrived yet! All these things were merely messengers, there simply to announce his imminent approach. When God finally did come down to meet the people, so powerful was the force

of his presence that in order not to destroy them utterly he veiled himself within a thick cloud. They must not see him, and God veiled himself in order to protect his people from the harm that even an accidental sighting of him could bring.

Vital lessons.

All of these events were teaching the people, and indeed us today, some very important lessons.

- i. God is to be treated with the highest respect. God certainly had not come to harm them, neither was it his intention to gratuitously bring fear. Having said that, we must none-the-less realise that to have such close contact with the Almighty Creator God inevitably arouses real fear in the people. So the point that is really being driven home here is that God is an awesome God and so he is to be revered.
- ii. God has spoken! God is an awesome God and when he speaks we must listen. His presence commands attention, and his words demand that we take them seriously. Now the entire Bible has all the authority of God, but in these chapters we find God's own DIRECTLY written words. Therefore we must give what God has written our undivided attention! Many in our world often fret and worry and live in fear, and tragically many of them die in fear with no peace at all. They do so because they do not know God, but in the Bible the one true God has made it

crystal clear how he wants us to live and how we can know him personally in our lives. He has told us what he is like and what he does. The one who has made the world and really does control the rain and the sun and everything else, has written these very things for us to know. And you and I can simply turn to the Bible and read the imperatives that God has given that show people how to live. Here in Exodus God spoke the words for those who were present and he wrote the words for later generations who were not! Failure to give careful heed to God's words will leave us without excuse on the day of judgement. We need to realise that mankind is not at liberty to pick and choose which parts of the Bible they will accept; we must accept it all.

This is why in Exodus 20 God has given us what is now described as the Ten Commandments.

God has said, *"You shall have no other gods before me...*

You shall not make for yourself an idol...

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God...

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...

Honour your father and your mother...

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

You shall not covet..."

All of these commandments are binding on every living person. We are not in a position to decide which of these we feel are reasonable and will take seriously and which ones we will not. They are all to be taken seriously because they are God's expression of his own character. Of course most people around us take the sixth commandment seriously, because it tells us we are not to take another human life. However, what about the commandment prohibiting adultery? Large numbers of people around us practise it in one form or another. What about stealing which happens in many guises, or coveting which can affect us in lots of tiny ways, or lying? Some people are 'economical with the truth', but really we mean they are dishonest in their speech.

You see, God has spoken! These are the principles by which he exercises judgement over men and women. He has expressed the principles that drive his invisible character. They are the principles by which we are to function too! These things are so important that God wrote it all down, and in our Bibles we find his very words.

A dilemma resolved.

To reject what God has said is to reject his moral character. For us to reject God's moral character deliberately is to make us guilty of great sin in the eyes of God. This means we will face God's eternal judgement alone, carrying all our own guilt. However, this changes when we repent from that attitude of disobedience because we no longer reject God's moral character deliberately. It is at this point

that we face a considerable dilemma because however hard we try, we still cannot conform to the high principles God has demonstrated. Although every believer today is to aim at perfection, we still all fail to reach that standard. Indeed, those who walk nearest to the Lord and live an obviously godly life are also the ones most conscious of how far short they fall of God's standard. So our problem is no longer one of rebellion, instead it becomes one of 'missing the mark', and that is the position every true Christian is in. Yes, we have turned around and we do accept what God has said and written. We truly seek to do those things that are right in his eyes, but we still fail. The Christian believer longs to be holy and pure and fully obedient to God, but we have to admit it is hard and we have to fight and we have to struggle to abide by God's moral code. Even when we have done our very best for God we have to admit we still fail. The apostle Paul expressed this dilemma perfectly in Romans 7:14, "*We know that the law is spiritual...*" - the law is this revelation of God's commands that we have been talking about - "*... but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*" By that Paul means he wants to obey God's moral code completely but cannot, and then he adds that he finds it all too easy to do the things that God would never do. So here is the dilemma. What is to become of us? Are we still going to be without hope if we are to face God's eternal judgement after all? Is there any point in maintaining the struggle? Yes, there is every point in maintaining the struggle. For Old Testament Israel God provided a solution for them.

This was in the sacrificial system he temporarily set up. Given that solution those who truly loved and revered him could be reconciled to him. The good news for us is that there is a solution for us as well, a way to be reconciled to God if we truly love and revere him.

We can describe this in the form of three steps.

Step 1: we turn away from a state of rebellion against God and we turn to a state of reverence and honour for him.

Step 2: we stop arguing with the principles that express his personality and we actually start to take on that character and those principles as our own.

Step 3: we ask for God to accept that Jesus Christ bore our judgement for us. He died on the cross to stand as a substitute, to take God's judgement for those who ask him to forgive them. Jesus is God's provision to resolve the dilemma, and because of him we can after all have peace with God.

Remember, our God is an awesome God, and he has spoken. Listen to him.

Chapter 4 The golden calf disaster (Exodus 32)

A good start

We have taken quite a jump in this chapter from looking at Exodus chapters 19 and 20 to consider chapter 32. We have mentioned previously that it was not our intention to look at every part of the book of Exodus, but there is a clear link between these two portions of the Bible. It will

help us if we look first at Exodus 19:5-8. God said, *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said.’”* It all seemed so perfect and it was a delightful scene. We could use a wedding as an illustration and say this was a marriage made in heaven! God, with all his power and all his might entered into a covenant relationship with his people – *“I will take you as my treasured possession”* - and they responded, *“We will do everything you (Lord) have said.”* The ten commandments of God in Exodus 20 show the kind of life Israel was to lead, in order to reflect his holy character. So it certainly looked as if this was going to be the perfect spiritual family, God and his children the people of Israel. At the end of Exodus 20 God reminded them, *“You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.”* Then we read of two further occasions when they respond: *“Everything the Lord has said we will do.”* So it looked as if everything was going very well indeed.

A dreadful fall

We come now to the events of Exodus 32 and this is just several weeks after Exodus 19 and 20. Astonishingly we find within just that short period things changed dramatically! We come to what can only be described as the ‘disaster’ of Exodus chapter 32. Indeed, the details of the chapter describe a bizarre and monstrous spectacle. We see the total collapse of the entire contract they had made with the Lord back in chapter 19. In spite of all their promises and God’s clear command to them, they made a golden calf and began to worship this instead of worshipping the Lord. They added, *“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”* It seems absolutely astonishing that they would stoop to such a thing. After all, the very first thing God had said to them in his revelation just a few weeks before in Exodus 20:2 was *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt...”* They had seen all that power which God exercised on their behalf, all that glory and awesomeness as God had made himself personally known to them. They had shuddered with real heart stopping fear. Yet in Exodus 32 the awesome God who had brought them out of Egypt was substituted for this lifeless golden calf. It was a really dark and sad day.

Let us recap a little and remind ourselves of the lessons we have already learned from Exodus, as these make Israel’s behaviour here in chapter 32 even more wicked. From the first part of Exodus we have seen that God is a rescuing God. This was entirely God’s doing, and could not have

been achieved by the people of Israel or their leader Moses. They had not been rescued by God because they deserved rescue. It was all of God's mercy and grace. Indeed, this record of God's dealing with Israel teaches us how any of us can escape from sin and its effects, and how anyone becomes acceptable in God's eyes. The key lesson of Exodus part 1 is that if anyone is to be rescued from sin and God's judgement then God himself must do it, because only God can do it. We come now to the key theme of Exodus part 2. Once God had rescued a people for himself, he desired to dwell with them. He desired to be present with the people he had brought out of slavery. This raises the question, 'How can THIS happen?' As circumstances are going to prove, it can only happen as God continues to exercise his mercy and his grace. As chapter 32 shows us, even for God's own chosen and rescued people, their natural tendency is still to return to idolatry, and we see this in the fact they made this golden calf.

Some lessons to learn

There are some very important lessons we must note from this sad episode. The first is how quickly and easily the people descended to this state of idolatry. We saw in Exodus 19 that, as God made himself known to his people, they were terrified at his presence. So terrified are they that they asked Moses to act as a mediator between themselves and God. As a result in the subsequent chapters - from Exodus 19 to chapter 32 - God had been speaking to Moses alone on the mountaintop and he had been away for about six weeks. This was the longest that

he had been absent as their leader. Aaron and other good men remained with the people. So Israel was not left without any supervision and support. Only six weeks was all it took for these people to grow restless and turn away from all they had learned about their Redeemer God. So Exodus 32:8 sees God telling Moses to go back down the mountain. God declared, "*The people have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them!*" They had had the clearest and most spectacular revelation of almighty God, yet in six weeks they had turned back to idolatry. It really is very sad, and very searching for us, even today. Sinful humans naturally return to idolatry when the light of true religion grows dim. Whatever form it takes, the desire drives us towards idolatry at every opportunity. You see, idolatry is not some ancient problem that Christian believers can dismiss. It is real and present, and the New Testament gives us clear warnings about it. In his first letter the apostle John says much to teach and encourage his readers, but right at the end, in the very last sentence, he writes those words, "*Dear children - keep yourselves from idols.*" It is obvious that John knows idolatry is a powerful temptation for his Christian readers, and it will draw them away from the one true God. Paul also writes about this in Galatians 1:6-7, "*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-which is really no gospel at all.*" It is the same sin that we find in Exodus 32. Old Testament Israel entered into a covenant relationship with God. They accepted God's laws, and they pledged obedience to all that God had said. Yet they

fell into idolatry. The New Testament explains precisely why the Holy Spirit ensured this sordid episode had been preserved down through the centuries. It is because it is relevant for the New Testament church. Consider how Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 10:6-8, “...these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.’ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did...” This is a direct reference to this episode at Sinai. Paul continues in verse 11, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.” Then Paul adds very pointedly in verse 12 “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” We must all be careful, because our roots are in idolatry, and it does not matter who we are, our natural tendency is to return there. The church in our present day must be vigilant to guard against it.

It is clear that the only way God was ever going to dwell amongst such a people was through the continued exercise of his mercy and grace. Apart from that there was only certain judgement awaiting these people.

Summary

As we close this chapter we are going to look at the events recorded in Exodus 32 under a number of headings.

i. What happened to Moses.

Moses was God's chosen servant! He stood as the mediator of the people of Israel. That is, he stood between them and God! Remember by the time we reach Exodus 32 Moses had gone away from them for a little while, about six weeks. We need to note what God's people do to him. Exodus 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.’” Moses was their leader, acting on behalf of Almighty God. Now suddenly he has been demoted. Suddenly he does not seem to be much more than something of a rascal. They said in a demeaning way, “This fellow Moses...” He had gained their loyalty for a time, but now he had gone out of sight up the mountain they concluded he was best forgotten, and they were going to organise another god. As far as they were concerned, Moses was history, and they would do nicely without him from now on! Again, it really is tragically astonishing that they should have taken such an attitude because he was God's own servant and they were God's own people, but they turned their back on him.

ii. What happened to Aaron?

Like Moses, Aaron was also a very important figure. He was Moses' spokesman. Whenever Moses had a message that had to be conveyed to the people it was generally Aaron who did it. You will remember that Aaron was also the agent of the signs and wonders that God demonstrated before the people. It was his staff that became the snake in front of Pharaoh. It was Aaron who was to point his staff over the waters of Egypt to turn them to blood. It was Aaron who was to stretch his hand out to bring the plague of frogs on Egypt, and with the other plagues. Aaron was the first ever High Priest to the people of Israel, and as such no other high priest enjoyed such an elevated position. He was Moses' brother, subordinate but indispensable to him. Aaron's position gave him great authority over God's people. Tragically this privileged and elevated man in God's Old Testament church led the people astray! It seems that Aaron's position made him proud, because when Moses returned from the mountaintop he said to Aaron, "*What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?*" Instead of leading the people to do what was right Aaron had himself been led astray. In some ways it would be comforting for us if we could label Aaron a rogue, a false prophet whose aim in life was to corrupt and destroy God's people, we would find his behaviour easier to explain then. But we cannot do that because he was not that kind of man. Aaron was a true, genuine leader of God's people who fell.

Aaron was a man of God who allowed human weakness and sinfulness, rather than God's laws, to govern his judgement.

Now you may be asking yourself the question, 'Could it happen to us?' Well, tragically it might. Sadly, in churches in many parts of the world today there are leaders who are acting just as Aaron did. They are leaders of God's people, but they are not directing the people to live in accordance with the Bible. You see, it does not need a scoundrel or a rebel to bring God's church down to a state of idolatry. It could be a decent upright person. It could even be one of our very own who fails in a crucial aspect of their leadership!

This possibility demands two things from Christian believers today. First, we must pray very much for the leaders in all of our churches; pastors, elders, deacons and so on, that God would keep them faithful to him. Then secondly we need to pray constantly for ourselves lest we likewise are led astray into idolatry or become the means of others falling into that sin. We really do need the Lord's help. We all need to walk close to the Lord and to guard our hearts every day.

iii. The form which this case of idolatry took in Exodus 32

We really have to say that the people trivialised the enormity of God's rescue! God had performed signs and wonders before their very eyes to rescue them from Pharaoh, but in verse 1 all remembrance of that had vanished! It is as though Moses had brought them out of Egypt to the wilderness, merely on his own impulse! That is what the people were in effect accusing him of, but v1 shows us it was not just Moses who had been demoted, it was also God himself! All God's work, all those mighty signs and wonders, all the destruction of the enemy Israel had feared so much, all of this was now left out of the people's assessment of the situation.

There is also something else we need to note, because it shows the subtle nature of this sin. God had been demoted, but he had not been completely left out! In Exodus 32:5 Aaron seems to remember that the Lord does deserve some kind of inclusion in the proceedings. After he had made the golden calf, he built an altar and announced, *"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord."* So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards, when they had got the 'God' bit out of the way, they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. So this was really a mixture of idolatry with the worship of God, and there is a special word to describe this, it is called 'syncretism'. Syncretism is where you blend or mix elements of faith in God

with elements of false religion. The idea is that you please everybody so that you end up with a religion to suit all tastes. That is what was going on here. I do not for one minute suppose that every one in the Israelite camp immediately and spontaneously agreed to reject the Lord. So Aaron took a line of compromise. He mixed a bit of the Lord - the early rising and the offerings for those who preferred more of the conservative and the traditional - with a bit of sitting down and eating and drinking for those who wanted a social occasion. Follow that with some high spirited revelry for the younger element - and the calf - a god that even the worst idolaters could accept. There was something here for everybody! However, when God looked down on it there was nothing there for him!

Whenever we read passages like this in the Bible we need to ask ourselves if this is what our worship of God has deteriorated to. Sadly, it is all too easy for us to do something similar and want to be entertained rather than to truly worship God. This is really very searching, because the Lord does expect us to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). God's law had been broken and there was no longer any excuse. God's people knew what God required. They had his own words ringing in their ears and recorded for us here in Exodus. It seems that no sooner had Israel agreed and signed up to the terms of the covenant than they broke them. God was rightly and justly angry, and there were far reaching consequences. The covenant

was *“IF you obey me fully and keep my covenant, THEN out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”* Israel had now proved to themselves, to us and to the angels in heaven that man cannot fulfil the requirements God has set before him. The evidence is formalised and recorded. The case is proven, that men and women are GUILTY before God. Their natural state is rebellion. If that truth was a bit hazy and vague before this time, it is crystal clear and set down in writing now. When Moses came down from the mountain we have to realise that it was not just anger that causes Moses to smash the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. Neither was it a reaction of shock, although we can be sure Moses was shocked! Neither was it a symbolic response. No! It was a deliberate action because the covenant had been broken. It was dissolved! The stone tablets were genuinely no good any more. Moses was effectively tearing up the contract because there was no contract any more. This covenant was dead! Israel had broken its side and God was therefore also released from his side. That is why God was now free in v10 to offer to Moses a ‘plan B’. God threatened to destroy the people and continue with Moses alone. The contract was broken! As Moses came to terms with the situation, he knew he had to plead God’s promise to Abraham. And in v13 we find that is exactly what he did. The reason was that in contrast to the covenant just broken, the covenant with Abraham was unconditional! It was not *“If you do this I will do that.”* God’s covenant with Abraham was one-sided. It was *“I will do ...”* And every time God repeated it to Abraham

and to Isaac and to Jacob, it was always unconditional *“I will do... I will do”*. It is a promise that depends solely on God’s grace and mercy. It demands nothing in return. It was as though Moses said, *“Lord, they cannot keep the law. But Lord, they are not your people by virtue of your law, they are your people by virtue of your grace, because that is the basis on which your promise was first given to Abraham. And now Lord, you have publically taken these people as your own, you cannot go back on what you have promised.”* As Moses pleaded the covenant of grace, the covenant with Abraham, God relented. God yielded to Moses’ intercession. It was an expression of his amazing grace.

This new situation leaves us with what humanly speaking we might call a contradiction. God’s anger against this sinful rebellion is consistent with his moral character and it is justified! What is more, God’s anger must be appeased or satisfied, and the seeming contradiction is that God loves his people and he continues to want to dwell with them. So how can he do that? How is this contradiction going to be resolved? The severe discipline that is recorded at the end of this chapter – the plague that the Lord inflicted on the people - that did not satisfy the demands of God’s justice, and it did not satisfy God’s anger against sin. So we are still left with the question, *‘How is this contradiction going to be resolved?’*

Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet who lived much later than the events of Exodus, could look back to Israel’s

darkest hour. Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 53 of One who “*was pierced for our transgressions, ...who was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” Now who was Isaiah talking about? Was he talking about Moses, because Moses volunteered to be the sacrifice? In Exodus 32:32 this dear man offered to sacrifice his own eternal life for the sake of his people. Moses said to God, “*...please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.*” Was Isaiah talking about Moses? No! God refused to trade with Moses’ life, because just as Moses could not rescue the people from Egypt, neither could he be this kind of rescuer! By God’s Spirit Isaiah was actually looking forward to the day when the apparent contradiction would be resolved! So certain was Isaiah of that resolution that he speaks of it as if God had already done it. Isaiah 53:5 “*... he - was pierced - for our transgressions, he - was crushed - for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace - was upon him, and by his wounds - we are healed.*” The ‘he’ in Isaiah 53 was to be the Lord Jesus Christ who was to die on the cross in the place of sinners, suffering their punishment so they could be forgiven. Isaiah said with certainty about the sufferings of Jesus that God will see “*the travail of his soul - and* ***SHALL BE SATISFIED!***”

Chapter 5 The danger of going it alone (Exodus 33.1-5)

An illustration.

In the country where I live television is very popular. Because so many people watch television it advertises all

sorts of products, and there was one particular advertisement that used a very catching phrase. The phrase was, “I know a man who can.” It was a company that would help anyone who was in a car when it broke down providing they had joined their insurance scheme. They had a series of these advertisements showing that if your car broke down, it did not matter where you were or what the weather was like, if you belonged to this scheme you could say that ‘you knew a man who could’ mend it. Help was on the end of the telephone and you could call for his assistance! Within the space of the advert everything was fixed and you were off on your way again. It was a very powerful advertising strategy. “I know a man who can.”

Sadly, in many parts of the world today, there are those who treat God as if he were “The man who can”.

They travel, make their plans and live without a single thought about God being involved. They never seek his guidance or live as he has directed in the Bible, and they spend their days just as they please. They never worship God or thank him, nor do they serve him and consider him, until something goes wrong that they had not planned and a problem or disaster arises. Suddenly they want someone to step in and supply the solution. It is only then that God springs to their mind! They had ignored him before the trouble arose, but now they reach for the spiritual telephone to call him as ‘the man who can’. In other words, they use God as if he were some convenience or problem solver. Now please do not misunderstand this. We are not saying it is wrong to ask God to help us. That is one of the great

blessings we have as followers of Jesus, but many think the only reason why God exists is to help them out when they demand and to be forgotten about the rest of the time. If that is what we believe then Exodus challenges that belief because, as we have studied this book, we have discovered the extraordinary difficulty involved in God coming close to mankind! For God to be present amongst people presents an enormous problem. Once God did walk and talk with Adam and Eve, but there came a time when he could not do so any more. Sin and rebellion had come in the way, and it was like a shutter coming down separating God from us and us from God (see Genesis 3 and Isaiah 59:2). There is a real problem between us and God, and many fail to understand that. Although the Bible teaches us God is everywhere, he is NOT present with people as they assume or think or expect.

1. THE CHALLENGE

i. God is not at our fingertips

Exodus 32 described how Israel returned to idolatry. They made a golden calf in abject disregard of God's command. Exodus 20:2ff *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, ... [God had said] ...you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."* God's command was clear enough, but in Moses' absence Israel did exactly what God told them not to do. Now in chapter 33 they must face up to the consequences.

It is interesting to note the context of Exodus chapters 32 and 33. They are in the section of the Bible that explains just how it was to going to be possible for God to dwell with his Old Testament people. As mentioned above, back in Genesis 3 Satan cut into the relationship between man and God when he tempted Adam and Eve to sin. Here in Exodus we are just at the point where God was making his repair of that relationship and significantly Satan was there again! He cut in with this temptation to idolatry trying to stop God coming back into relationship with his people. It was a crisis point in world history, and man fell once again as Satan enticed him away from God in his attempt to destroy the bridge that God was building. If you read from Exodus 25 to chapter 40 it shows just how elaborate the preparations had to be that allowed his own people to enjoy God's presence with them. You would notice that the other nations of the earth are not included! God offers his presence to be with this particular people Israel, who have been chosen by God and rescued from slavery. However in Exodus 33:3 that privilege seems as if it is about to be lost because Israel's idolatry broke their side of the covenant with God and so he said, *"I will not go with you"*. This short statement challenges those modern suppositions which many hold that we have the right to assume that God is just 'there' waiting for a call from anyone at any time. In Exodus he clearly does not have that kind of relationship with the unbelieving nations of the earth, and now it seems he is not going to make his presence known with his own people either.

ii. God's presence - an unsurvivable experience

The next phrase in v3 presents a second challenge to our modern minds. God told Israel why he could not go with them: *"I might destroy you on the way."* In v5 Moses repeats God's verdict: *"If I were to go with you even for a moment I might destroy you."* THIS is the real God of the Bible. What a surprise! He is not some kind of benevolent old gentleman at everyone's beck and call! He is not a God for whom it really does not matter what we do because in the end he will let us all off anyway. And as we analyse what is going on here, we learn yet another characteristic of the Christian, namely, our God is completely pure, absolutely perfect. Right at his core God's heart BURNS against all wickedness and evil of any sort (see also Habakkuk 1:13). When we come to unravel and understand what the essence of God is we find passionate purity and absolute justice. Here, verses 3 and 5 express the heart of the entire problem that exists between mankind and God. It was the experience of Israel as they had come to this point in the drama they had enacted on the stage of world history. The sin of idolatry they had just fallen into has served to uncover and expose the whole problem, and it is simply this: sinful men and women cannot exist in the presence of a pure and holy God! The two simply cannot mix any more than you can mix light and darkness or oil and water. When God said his presence would not go with Israel it was not said, as is often the case with men and women, in a fit of anger, neither was it the response of hurt feelings that had sent him into a sulk. There was a genuine problem. For men and women in

their sin to come into the presence of God would mean their destruction. That is the effect that God's holy purity and complete perfection has on sinfulness.

Now it is important to emphasise this because it runs counter to everything that so many people want to believe about God. They want a nice soft cuddly God who is there for their difficult times and whose essence is not purity and holiness but tolerance and generosity. In complete contrast God, as he is revealed in the Bible, is shown to have a heart that burns against wickedness and evil. We need to think carefully about this because if we really analysed our thinking would we expect him to be any other way? When we see all the unfairness in our world and all the suffering inflicted by the tyranny of oppressive regimes and the heartless way that cruel men brutalise their victims, don't we cry out for justice? Don't we look to God ultimately to bring those cruel men to account? Doesn't even our crooked sense of right and wrong expect God to exercise justice? If God's heart did not burn against all wickedness and evil in our world then he would not be a holy and righteous God. In fact, if he was like that even those who do believe would be ashamed even of him. We must carefully remember the Bible's teaching in both Testaments is that God's heart is one of the utmost purity and perfection and his anger burns against all wickedness and evil. This leads us directly to a major problem, because there is no way sinful men and women can survive his presence. Look again at Exodus 33:3 where God says, *"You are a stiff necked people."* This tells us the problem

that puts distance between us and God is not on his side; the problem is with the human heart. After months and years of God revealing his own character to Israel, in this verse he gave his assessment of their character which they had revealed over those same months and years; the character that had been exposed in such a climactic way in Exodus 32. God said they were ‘stiff-necked’. Today we would say something like ‘self-willed’, or ‘stubborn’ or ‘rebellious’. Israel would understand the term ‘stiff-necked’ because it expressed the idea of a beast of burden who would not respond to the person controlling the bridle. For, shown Israel the right way to reflect his character and personality, but they had responded by following their own way.

The challenge for us is that, men and women in their sinful state cannot survive in the presence of God. Now you might want to say, “But we live in the New Testament era, and surely this changes the situation.” The answer the Bible gives is that God has not changed. Men and women in their sinful state still cannot survive his holy presence. So the problem ancient Israel faced is the same one we face today. How can sinful people draw near to God and survive?

2. THE SOLUTION

Some may be tempted to suggest that this leaves us with an extraordinary contradiction to resolve, a contradiction because the whole plot of the Bible is to reveal that also in the heart of God is love and faithfulness and undeserved

kindness. Not only that, but God’s love has an object and the object is mankind. God sets his affection on men and women, and he does desire to make his presence with them. So the question arises, ‘How can he do it?’

We need to move forward in time from the book of Exodus to the New Testament, but before we do we need to note that Moses mediated between God and the people of Israel in these latter chapters of Exodus.

The covenant that the people had broken by their sin was renewed, and God did bring his presence into the midst of his people. He did it by virtue of the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a special tent that God told Moses to construct. The details are explained in the dozen or so chapters on either side of Exodus 32 & 33.

We are not going to go into the detail here, but in Hebrews 9:1-5 the writer succinctly summarises the essential aspects of the tabernacle for us. *“Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lamp stand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover.”* The writer of Hebrews then goes on to explain the symbolism of the tabernacle and it is full of

deep meaning. The essence of the symbolism deals directly with the problem of how a holy and just God can be present with sinful people, and we shall return to that in a little while because there is another important point to note. One thing Hebrews reminds us of is that here on earth it is possible for someone to spend an entire lifetime staying remote from God, never facing up to his reality and never bothering whether God is present or not and live very happily like that to a good old age. However, there comes a time when they have to die. Then they will no longer have a choice. If they did not deal with the issue before death then they will have to confront Almighty God. Hebrews 9:27 brings us face to face with that reality *"...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement..."* On that day, they will meet this pure and holy God, the God who can tolerate no sin, the God whose heart burns against all wickedness and evil and they will have no prospect of surviving his judgement and going into his eternal presence. That is what God's holy justice demands.

This is very solemn and must be considered carefully bringing us back to our question, 'How can sinful men and women stand in the presence of God and not be destroyed?' We need to return to the tabernacle described in Exodus because this demonstrated to God's Old Testament people that there was one way that sinful men and women can come to God. Its symbolism showed first of all that God must judge sin and does judge sin. This was seen in the death of the animals that were sacrificed to God

there. He cannot pretend that our sin does not exist. Then the symbolism went on to show that as sin was dealt with God protects his people from his dreadful judgement, and this was done by 'substitution'. Now we use substitutes in ordinary daily experiences, for example, on a cricket or football field a substitute can take the place of an injured player. The person who was unfit to carry on playing is replaced by another who is fit. In Hebrews 9 and 10 the whole of the symbolism of the Old Testament tabernacle is uncovered and explained. The writer shows that it all pointed to God's own Son Jesus Christ. Here at last we see the kind and loving plan of God. People can enter into a relationship with him after all because Jesus Christ became our substitute. Through his sacrificial death God's people are made holy. This means they are made acceptable to God; they are made fit to be in his presence. Hebrews 9:27-28 *"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people..."* Hebrews 10:14 *"... by one sacrifice - he [Jesus Christ] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."* How can God consider sinful people holy? Because God says (v17), *"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."* Why will God not remember these sins? Because they are forgiven. How can a perfect God forgive our sinful state? Because Jesus Christ was our substitute and bore the whole of God's judgement for sin. God had such compassion on our helpless position, our inability to get ourselves right and our failure to pass his judgement, that he so loved the world that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect life

and die as a sacrifice in our place for our sin. Of all people there was no reason for God to be angry with him. Of all people there was no reason for God to judge him. Of all people there was no reason for God to place all our sin on his dear Son. Yet this is exactly what happened. Jesus became our substitute, and the Old Testament tabernacle tells us that was God's plan all along! So, because of what the tabernacle symbolised, God was able to be present in the tabernacle with his Old Testament people, and because the symbolism was entirely completed in Jesus Christ, God is able to be present now with his people today.

CONCLUSION

Knowing after all that God can make his presence known and enjoyed, further questions arise, namely, 'Who with and Where?'

Who with?

It is important to recognise his presence is not with everyone. God is present with his people, and his people today are known as 'Christians'. When we believe in Jesus Christ, when we admit our sinfulness to him and believe he was judged in our place as our substitute, then God forgives us and we become one of his people. This is a very personal thing and you have either taken that step or you have not. Remember the Bible tells us that if we have trusted in Jesus then we are forgiven by God, but if we have not then we are condemned already. Therefore there is an urgent need to believe in Jesus Christ and be simply and completely forgiven.

Where is God's presence?

Well, we still cannot see him any more than people of the Old Testament could. The fact is that God makes his presence in each believer. Paul in his letters describes each Christian as "the temple of the living God".

Perhaps the last surprise for our modern culture is of thinking that a church building is a holy place. It actually is not! It is the heart of the believer which has become God's temple (see 1 Corinthians 6:18-20). If a Christian believer leaves a church building all they have done is to have left behind an empty shell of bricks or wood or whatever the building was made of. God's holy presence is with them as people and will accompany them wherever they go. So through Jesus Christ and only through Jesus Christ, God is able to be personally present with his people. If you need any encouragement to become one of God's people then remember, Christians are not faultless people, they are simply forgiven people, and anyone can be forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.

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