

INTERCEDING FOR THE WAYWARD

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Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

Today, I'd like for us to look at the prayer by Moses found in Exodus 32. Moses has gone up to meet with God leaving the children of Israel down with Aaron. This is where Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments, and all that God is telling him for the children of Israel now that they have come out of Egypt, and how they should be a covenant people with Him.

Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. "Come on," they said, "make us some gods who can lead us. We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt."

So, Aaron said, "Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me."

All the people took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!"

The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry."

The Lord told Moses, "Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'"

Then the Lord said, "I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them, and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation."

But Moses tried to pacify the Lord his God. "O Lord!" he said. "Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, 'Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth'? Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all of this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.'"

So, the Lord changed his mind about the terrible disaster he had threatened to bring on his people.

Let us pray together.

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit in power and great authority. Allow wisdom to come to me Lord, as I articulate everything that you alone want me to say. Then touch all of our hearts that we would receive your Word and let it be a transforming Word, Lord, transforming our lives into something that you want us to see and do today. In your name Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Well, we can see that the Israelites are in big trouble. It seems like they have such short memories. All or a sudden, they forget all that God has done. And yet, if you were to look a little indulgently at them, you may be able to see from where they are coming. They had followed Moses out of Egypt and had seen all the things God had done. Now suddenly, Moses is no longer with them. He's gone for forty days, and they are beginning to wonder what's going on. In situations like this, the way every one of us responds is to tend to move back into the comfortable. In their minds, they too are going back to the comfort of Egypt where there is a plethora of gods to worship – tangible gods that they can see. That's what they wanted to make them comfortable at this time. And they forsook Yahweh, their God who had brought them out.

We see that the Lord levels a six-fold indictment against them. In vs. 7&8 He says:

- They have corrupted themselves,
- They have turned aside from the commandment I had given them,
- They have made a golden calf for themselves
- They worship the golden calf
- They sacrifice to the golden calf,
- They say about the golden calf – these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.

I read this and I think how it must have hurt the Lord to see this, to hear His children whom He had brought out of Egypt, point to a golden calf and say, "This is what brought us out of Egypt. We read that He is angry, fiercely angry. And yet, we realize that there is one thing that is almost under the surface of what is written. It seems as if God, in pointing out to Moses what is happening down there, is actually inviting him to do something. It is not explicit; and yet, it seems implicit because there is no reason for Him to tell Moses what is happening. He can see what has happened already. He didn't wait for anything when He brought the plagues, when He opened the Red Sea. God moved decisively.

Yet, He says, "My fierce anger is against them, and I'm going to wipe them out." Yet, He's not doing it. He's telling Moses what He wants to do to them, thereby giving Moses an opportunity, if he wants to take it, to intercede. Just as God stopped by with Abraham and then said, "Should I tell Abraham what I am about to do?" and He did. And that became the prayer of intercession for Sodom. So, it seems that God, in revealing His anger and all the indictments to Moses, is almost giving him too, an opportunity to intercede and intervene.

And Moses steps up into this space and he in turn, gives God reasons why He shouldn't do what He is about to do. He gives three reasons:

1. He says, "Remember, these are not my people; they are Your people Lord, whom You brought out of Egypt," in vs. 11. God had told him earlier, "Look at your people!" and Moses is reminding Him, "These are not my people. These are Your people. These are the people who cried out to You when they were in slavery. These are the people whose cries You heard. These are the people whom You told me to go and get out of Egypt. These are the people for whom You sent plague after plague against Egypt so that they could be freed. These are You people for whom You parted the Red Sea so that they could come out. Your people, Lord, not mine. They are Your people whom You brought out of Egypt. Remember this, Lord."
2. Destroying them? Your people in the wilderness? What would the Egyptians say, that You brought them out just to slaughter them? What good is that? what sense does that make?

That would be bad for Your reputation. How could You do something like this? Think about what the rest of the world would say when they hear what has happened to Israel!

3. He says, "Lord, remember the promises of land and descendants, that You made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob long ago. You always keep Your promises. You made an oath, a promise to them." And in a sense, Moses is saying, "I will not step into this." Because if you look at what God has told Moses, He says, "I will destroy them, then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation." But Moses will have nothing of that. he says, "Lord, remember Your promises to Abraham, how You said that You will make a great nation. This is Your nation; these are Your people. Master, remember the promises that You made to them.

Church, as we study the great prayers of the bible, we begin to see a kind of pattern for intercessors. Here again we see boldness. It starts with **boldness**, and then, even in the face of God's fierce anger, he is **persistent**. And he is **willing**. The three traits that we saw with Abraham getting reinforced here.

But we also see that intercessors state their case before God based on His promises, His character, His righteous, and His precedence – the things that He has done before. His character, His promises and His righteousness. It has everything to do with God. I think when we learn to pray like this, then we begin to pray in accordance with God's will for us rather than contrary to it. I think that's what John meant when he wrote in 1 John 5:14-15 *"And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him."*

We ask anything in accordance to His will, according to His promises, His righteousness, His character, and the things that He has done in the past. Further, I think when we support our prayers with appeals to scripture, we align ourselves perfectly with God's will, because that is His word.

Exodus 32 clearly indicates that Moses' prayer changed God's proposed actions. And if this is true, then prayer is powerful, since by prayer, we can appeal to and have God do something He otherwise was not planning to do. That's the basic premise that underlines a prayer of intercession and petition that, as we come to Him with intercession, pleading, petitioning for something for someone else, there is a good chance that God will relent and do something about it.

What are the characteristics of a good intercessor?

1. **An intercessor is caring**, must be caring for the people for whom one is interceding. "Love your neighbor as yourself." To care for others, to be interested in the welfare of others, to be concerned in the downfall of others, in the sin of others, to be able to care enough to want to do something, to bring change, to lead them on a better path – the path of righteousness.
2. **An intercessor must believe that prayer can change things**. God is sovereign and He can do what He wants. We read in Exodus 33:19 *"And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."* I am sovereign; I can do what I want. God often responds with mercy when we intercede for others.

The Psalmist in Psalm 106 says, *"Therefore, He said He would destroy them, talking of the children of Israel. Had not Moses, His chosen one, stood in the breach before Him to turn away His wrath from destroying them?"* Because of Moses being willing, believing that he could ask God to change and relent, and doing so, he was able then to do it.

So, Moses the chosen one, and part of what he was chosen for was to be a mediator.

In his book, 'A Praying Life', Paul Miller talks about two common errors in presenting our petitions to God.

1. Not asking. We don't ask enough of God. If we don't ask, we are confessing our belief that God can't do everything.
2. Asking selfishly. If we ask selfishly, we are bearing witness that we think God ought to do our will and not His.

"The antidote to these two errors," he says, "is to ask boldly and surrender completely."

You and I, we must believe that our prayers can change God's mind and action. If you don't, you won't be able to pray like Moses or Abraham or Elijah, but only a passive "Thy will be done." I know that's the way Jesus prayed, but He spoke those words after wrestling with God fervently, praying fervently to Him. It was only at the end that He said, "Nevertheless, not My will be done, but Thine be done." Our problem sometimes is that we are unwilling to wrestle in prayer as Moses did. We don't believe in the power of prayer, so we pray 'Will be' prayers.

I need to state this, albeit in passing. Theologians have trouble with prayer and the doctrine of immutability, that is, that God is unchanging in nature, desire and purpose. And since our passage insists that prayer somehow changes God's mind, we may balk at believing this. But key to our understanding of prayer is vs. 14 which simply says, "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened." While we believe in an unchanging God, an omniscient God, we also see very clearly but understand so dimly. Because our finite minds are involved in this task, we cannot understand it.

But I want to submit to you what we can clearly see before our eyes. We see evidences of God's relenting. Take Nineveh – He tells Jonah to tell them forty days and they're overthrown. And then they repent. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened.

Then we see Moses – God says, "I'm going to do away with them," and after Moses has presented his case, the bible says, "so the Lord changed His mind about the terrible disaster that He had threatened to bring on His people."

Then in 1 Samuel 15:11, about Saul, God says, "I'm sorry that I ever made Saul king." Then who can forget David, believing this about God and trying to pray so that God will change His mind about the child that he had through Bathsheba. God of course, didn't. But it was David who believed that such a thing could be possible.

A. J. Heschel has said, "No word is God's final word. Judgment, far from being absolute, is conditional. A change in man's conduct brings about a change in God's judgment."

So why pray? Because your prayers affect the way your Father, the sovereign of the universe will conduct His affairs. Prayer is truly wonderful and awesome. There are almost 33 instances, scholars say, where God has relented in the Old Testament, changed His mind about something, and it has always to do with disaster, calamity or the destruction that He has threatened. In all but one of those cases it occurred either because the people repented or because some prophet or holy man interceded on their behalf. The Lord's implicit promise is that He will relent when we repent.

Jeremiah 18:7-10 says, "*If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I*

will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I intended to do to it.”

God is sovereign, but God is moved by prayer of intercession that often leads to repentance. There's a wonderful nugget here for us, and I want us to land on that today. The intercession that Moses made was entirely based on God's character, not on the merits of His people but on God's mercy. However, Moses was doing something different; Moses was praying on behalf of the wicked. Abraham was interceding for the righteous of the land. “Lord, what if there are fifty righteous people; forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten righteous people in the land?” Moses was praying not for the righteous. He wasn't saying to the Lord, “Lord, there are many who didn't bow down to that calf. There are many who didn't bring gold ear-rings and give.” He was praying, interceding for the wicked.

That's what gripped me as I was moving through this sermon. This passage is looking where God wanted us to land and engage. I felt that this was it, that God wants us to intercede for the wicked, sinful, done something wrong, forsaken God, stubborn, stiff-necked, forgotten what God has done – to intercede for these kinds of people.

Remember, in this passage, God relented even before the people repented – the power of intercession that Moses brought to bear. So, let's turn it to us and ask the question: For whom should you and I be interceding, petitioning God for? A rebellious son or daughter who is walking in sin blatantly; someone who stubbornly indulges in wrong-doing, knowing fully well that it is wrong. It could be a friend; somebody you care about. Or maybe, it's a die-hard atheist or an agnostic, trying to damage the faith by some of the words that they are speaking. Maybe, somebody who's forgotten the rich history of God intervening in their own lives, and are now just doing exactly the opposite, following their own vices. Maybe, somebody whose golden calf today is work or addiction, success, riches, power, influence, or even some relationship.

Beloved, God I believe, is laying the duty of intercession on you and me today. To be able to stand in the gap and pray for these who have lost their way, who are deep in sin, far away from God, living on the husks that pigs are eating, shaking their fist at God. God is saying, “Will you come boldly before me? Will you be persistent for them? Would you be willing to intercede for them? That is our challenge today.

Shall we pray?

Lord, we are willing. Inspire us through Your Spirit, to know whom to pray for. And then Lord, fill us with a fervent desire every day to unrelentingly pray and intercede for these ones. Master, have mercy, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.