



FAILURE & FORGIVENESS

Exodus 32-40, Mark 5:1-20

Dan Claire

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Imagine it's your first day of work after being away for your wedding and honeymoon. And what a big, beautiful, glorious wedding you had! What a ceremony! What a feast! Now you're back, and you come home from work, and from the moment you step inside you know something has gone terribly wrong. All your stuff is gone. All the pictures of you and your beloved have been replaced, showing your beloved with someone else! And then, what's that sound coming from the bedroom? You open the door to the bedroom, and there you discover your beloved in bed with another... cow?

And your beloved says, "Who are you? Get out of here! How dare you call my spouse a cow!"

That's how God felt in Exodus 32. There had just been a spectacular wedding ceremony at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-24), in which God and Israel made a covenant with one another. They said their vows to one another, and wrote them down on stone tablets. Then there was a grand reception with the best food and drink. Then Moses went back up the mountain to receive God's instructions for the tabernacle, so that they might journey together to the Promised Land.

Moses was with God forty days on the mountain. Meanwhile, down below, the Israelites didn't just have an affair. They didn't just divorce and remarry. *They rewrote their history!!* Six weeks earlier they had confessed that they were the Lord's people. The Lord had delivered from death and destruction, to himself, for the sake of the world. But while Moses was away, they took down all the wedding pictures, got in bed with another lover, and made a new confession: "This cow brought us out of Egypt, so we love it and will follow it all the way to Canaan."

Quite understandably, God was furious. He wanted a divorce.

But Moses didn't. Think of how he felt, as his whole world was going to pieces. It was his own brother Aaron who was at the helm in the rebellion. Moses' life work and legacy were in jeopardy. The fates of his family, his country, and the whole world were hanging in the balance.

Moses had to act fast if he was to save this marriage. And he did. As we'll see in what follows, Moses' ministry of reconciliation between God and Israel is a foretaste of Jesus, the savior of the world.

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE: GOD HATES IDOLATRY BECAUSE GOD IS DETERMINED TO REDEEM THE WHOLE WORLD

We need to begin with God's perspective, because we don't see things God's way. Israel was caught in the act, in bed with a golden cow. God had every right to a divorce. And yet because of our own sin, our sympathies lie with Israel. The Israelites were people just like us. Their problem is our problem, because as Calvin said, "The heart is ever a factory of idols," from the ancient world right up to today. We may not be in the habit of fashioning golden idols, but we're all accomplished idolators. In order to see and better understand the gravity of our own infidelity, we need to begin with God's side of the story.

God's Perspective, in a nutshell, is *déjà vu*. He's seen this same thing before, back in the Garden of Eden. When God created the universe and filled it with creatures, he made Adam in his image and installed him as the king over all creation. He gave Adam a queen, Eve, to help him fill the earth with God's images, and rule it with righteousness and justice. There were clear lines of authority:

God
King Adam
Queen Eve
Creatures

But then something went terribly wrong. One of the creatures began behaving like a human—the serpent began to talk. He tempted the Queen, saying that if she would disobey God and obey the serpent instead, then she would become like God. Eve passed this temptation on to the King, who capitulated and did exactly as he was told, in submission to his wife. Then came the evasion—all the blame shifting and denial as God asked them what happened. Then God cast them out of the garden, and set the cherubim to guard the gate with a flaming sword.

That's how idolatry began. The created order was turned upside down:

The Serpent
Queen Eve
King Adam
God

And the serpent's promise turned out to be a lie. Instead of becoming like God, sin robbed us of our humanity and made us animals. We were no longer fit to be God's image bearers.

The book of Exodus is the story of a new hope for the entire world, by means of a fresh start for God's people. God rescued them from slavery beneath that serpent, Pharaoh. At Sinai, God and Israel made a covenant with one another, whereby they came under the headship of the Lord. The Ten Commandments were like Israel's wedding vows, and they began with two commandments intended to keep Israel under God's headship:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of

anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6 ESV)

As in Eden, now at Mt. Sinai: everything God had made was good. But then something went terribly wrong. While Moses was away, the people tempted Aaron. They said to him, “We don’t know what has become of Moses, this man (“adam” in Hebrew). So get up and make us a god who will lead us.” Then Aaron capitulated and did exactly as he was told, in submission to the people, just as Adam had submitted to Eve. Aaron made an idol for them, and they feasted on burnt offerings and peace offerings, just as they had done with the Lord at their wedding reception a few weeks earlier. “*The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play, (32:6)*” just like the animals they had become. From God’s point of view, Israel wasn’t just in bed with a cow; they’d become animals themselves. Indeed, as God says of them three times in this passage, they were “stiff-necked”—more donkey than human.

As in the Fall, when God confronted Adam & Eve, so also in Exodus 32, as Moses confronted Aaron, and Aaron gave the lamest excuse in human history (32:24), “I threw it into the fire, and out popped the calf.” So Moses led in an expulsion of some of the worst offenders (32:27) this time with Levites playing the part of the cherubim, going to and fro with their swords at the gates of the camp.

After all the amazing and wonderful things that happened in Exodus, now we’ve reached the nadir. Everything has broken to pieces.

Think about why Moses shattered the tablets when he got back to the camp. It’s because they were copies of the Ten Commandments, the wedding vows that the people had violated, not in some minor, peccadillo sort of way, but egregiously. When Moses broke the tablets, it was a dramatic act, demonstrating what had already happened to the covenant, like sawing a wedding band in half because of a broken marriage. The covenant had established God’s sovereign kingship over Israel:

God
Moses
Aaron
Israelites
Possessions (including cattle)

After the insurrection, this order was turned upside down:

Cow
Israelites
Aaron
Moses & God

It was the Fall all over again. Israel was no longer fit to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.



So how in the world did everything unravel so quickly? If we go back to the beginning of the story we find that the insurrection began very subtly, almost unnoticeably, with *impatience*. The people were tired of waiting on God and Moses, so they took matters into their own hands.

Idolatry usually begins for us this very same way. Not with the flip of a switch, but with a growing, gnawing sense of impatience. You've asked God for something again and again, and not only hasn't he given it to you, but it feels like he's been totally silent. "Is he even there? Is he even listening? How long must I wait?"

Then a feeling of *desperation* sets in. "God's not going to come through for me on this. If I wait many more years, I'll be dead. I've got to take care of this myself."

Then comes the *exchange*, when you give your allegiance to someone or something else, and you make this pledge: "I'll do whatever you require of me." Name that desire, whether pleasure or popularity or power. As long as your allegiance remains with the Lord, that desire remains under your control:

God
You
Desire

But when impatience gives way to desperation, and desperation eventually erodes your last vestiges of restraint, then comes the exchange and you say, "I'll do it. I'll do anything, whatever you ask of me. Just give me my heart's desire." At that point, you too have become an animal:

Desire
You
God

Do you feel yourself growing impatient with God? Is that feeling of desperation setting in? Take care, because you may be on the verge of making that thing into your own golden calf.

Or have you already made the exchange? Is there some desire that has so captivated your heart that it now controls you? It's very likely a desire for something good, like influence or popularity or wealth, marriage or sex or children. These are all good things, so long as they don't become ultimate things in your life. When they do, they become your new god, whether you know it or not. You may still believe that you're a committed Christian. But deep down in your heart you have a new confession. "I was unhappy until the fulfillment of this desire delivered me. Now I will follow it wherever it leads. I have made it my new god."

Has anything captivated your affections in this way? If so, do you see what's happened? You've given your allegiance to a creature rather than the Creator. You've fashioned for yourself a god, just as weak and powerless and silly as that golden calf back at Mt. Sinai. No matter how much authority you give it, no matter how much you worship it, it cannot save you. It won't long satisfy your desires. And it will leave you longing for meaning and purpose apart from the Lord. As Christopher Wright says, "[F]alse gods never fail to fail. That is the only thing about a false god you can depend on."¹

Whatever your idol, you can be certain that it will fail you. And that brings us to the reason that God hates idolatry: it undermines his purposes for the world. Remember God's ambition is to set the world to rights, to make all things new, so that the knowledge of the glory of the Lord fills the earth as the waters cover the seas. God delivered us from death and destruction to himself for the sake of the world. When we give our allegiance to idols, we become part of the problem rather than the solution. Not only will your false god fail you, but it will also fail the world. It won't bring the shalom that we all are longing for. God hates idolatry because God is determined to redeem the whole world.

MOSES' PERSPECTIVE: GOD SHOULD REDEEM US BECAUSE GOD IS DETERMINED TO REDEEM THE WORLD

God wanted a divorce, but Moses fought to save the marriage by interceding with God on Israel's behalf and by calling Israel to repent and return to the Lord. It happened in four phases. In what remains, we'll consider each phase from a thoroughly Christian perspective. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus was greater than Moses (Heb 3:1-6), and that Jesus now lives to intercede for us (Heb 7:25). So as we see how Moses interceded on behalf of Israel, we'll get a foretaste of

¹ Christopher JH Wright, *The Mission of God*, IVP Academic (2006). p. 169.

what Jesus is doing right now on our behalf.

Phase 1. Mercy. As soon as God told Moses what the people had done, Moses pled for mercy. Still atop Mt. Sinai, God had said to Moses:

Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (Exodus 32:10 ESV)

Moses responded with a courageous prayer, and it’s a model for how we also ought to intercede before the Lord:

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” (Exodus 32:11-13 ESV)

Did you notice how, throughout this appeal, Moses never downplayed Israel’s sin? He never said, “Don’t be so hard on them, because they had the best of intentions.” In fact, in his prayer Moses had almost nothing to say about the people. Rather, he made three points, and all three of them focused on God’s mission to redeem the world:

1. These are your people, God. You brought them thus far; don’t let it all come to naught. Don’t let your dramatic rescue at the Red Sea be wasted.
2. What will your enemies say, O Lord? Don’t give the Egyptians the opportunity to gloat.
3. Remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, namely, that all the nations of the world would be blessed through the redemption of this people. Don’t let your mission to the world fail.

Again, these three points focused on God’s mission to redeem the world. Overall, what Moses argued was that it was in the Lord’s best interests not to destroy the Israelites and start again. That’s the key. As Ross Blackburn puts it, “Rather than defending the people before the Lord, Moses defends the Lord before the Lord,” so that God would have mercy and continue his mission to the world.² It was for this reason that “*the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Ex 32:14)*”

Over and over again in the prayers of the Bible, God’s people pray this way, arguing for rescue and mercy and healing because of God’s plans for the world. And of course, it’s at the heart of the way that Jesus teaches us to pray, isn’t it? Because Jesus said to pray for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That’s God’s mission!

² W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus (New Studies in Biblical Theology)*. IVP Academic (2012) p. 173.

We tend to approach God in prayer as our friend. Therefore, we simply ask him for things without giving him a reason. “God, please protect Diana and Kelly in South Sudan.” But the great majority of prayers in the Bible approach God more as king, and as such, these prayers ask God for something in alignment with the vision and direction of his kingdom. There are few people in the Bible who are closer “friends” with God than Moses. Yet he approached God as king, and made his argument according to what he understood to be God’s missional purposes. Should we not do the same whenever we pray? “God, please protect Diana and Kelly, because they are your ambassadors to the people of South Sudan, who are in dire need, and they won’t know your love if you don’t protect her. Likewise, help the Honeys find a house here, because hear the good news of your kingdom if you don’t protect your ambassadors.”

Phase 2. Repentance & Faith. In Phase 1, Moses pled for mercy and the Lord granted it. But that didn’t mean that all was forgiven, nor should it be. Israel had been grossly and flagrantly unfaithful to the Lord, and it would be an outrageous violation of God’s character for him to take Israel back without any repentance on their part.

The Gospels tell us that when Jesus began his ministry, he did so by going from town to town and saying, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Therefore, repent and believe in the Gospel. (Mark 1:15)*” Likewise, in Phase 2, when Moses came down the mountain, he foreshadowed the ministry of Christ by calling the people of Israel to repentance and faith. As he approached the camp, he broke the covenant tablets so that all could see the gravity of what they had done. Then he ground their idol into dust and made the people drink it, perhaps as a way of showing them the powerlessness of their man-made god. Then there was some kind of battle, in which the people had to choose sides between the Lord and the cow, and the idolators were soundly defeated. And finally we see the fruit of Moses’ actions in repentance and faith. Two episodes show us a change of heart among the people: in 32:4 they mourned their sin, and in 32:10 the people began to worship God from the doors of their tents. The point of both these scenes is to show repentance and faith as they returned to the Lord.

Phase 3. Reconciliation. In choosing not to destroy Israel, God also chose to withdraw from Israel. You may recall from Exodus 25-31 that if God drew near to Israel apart from an atonement for their sin, they would be consumed by God’s contagious holiness. (That’s why they needed the Tabernacle.)

In 32:31, Moses went back up Mt Sinai and he prayed a second and even more courageous prayer. Moses said,

“Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” (Exodus 32:31-32 ESV)

This moment is an important anticipation of what Jesus would come to do for all God’s people. Moses offered his own life in atonement for their sin. But even though it was a wonderfully brave thing to say, God refused, saying:

“Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.” (Exodus 32:33 ESV)

Why do you think God refused, after having answered Moses' other prayers throughout Exodus? What's different about this prayer? Do you see that Moses gave no rationale for why God should forgive them? There's no explicit alignment with God's kingdom purposes for the world. Moses only asked God to forgive. And apparently that wasn't enough, because God said no.

So after another interlude, Moses went up the mountain to see God again. And in 33:16 he prayed again, only this time he argued on the basis of God's mission to the world, saying:

For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:16 ESV)

In other words, it's as if Moses was saying, "If you don't go with us, then how will the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord? If we go without you, how then will we spread your fame?"

It must have worked, because this time God said yes:

The LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do." (Exodus 33:17 ESV)

God said yes. He and his people were reconciled, and God agreed to go with them to the Promised Land.

Why did God say yes? I believe that it was because Moses aligned his prayer with God's perspective. Remember God's perspective: God hates idolatry because God is determined to redeem the world. Moses found a way to pray in alignment with God's kingdom. Moses' perspective became: God should redeem Israel because God is determined to redeem the world.

Have you ever thought about how much easier it would be for God to redeem the world without our help? Think of all the scandals involving priests and pastors. Think of all the schisms and splits. Think of all the apostasy and unbelief. Wouldn't God be better off just starting over rather than using us as his ambassadors?

But that's not God's mission. God's mission is to redeem the world through the redemption of humanity. He wants us under his authority, so that we might bring the world under his authority:

God
humanity
cosmos

God intends to restore his image in us as he makes all things new. Even though he could redeem the world in any way he chooses, he has determined to do it through the church, his kingdom of priests and holy nation.

Consequently, we need Jesus. We're like the man that Jesus met at the tombs in Mark 5. Because of sin, he was more animal than man, under the control of something other than God. What

Jesus did for him was to deliver him from slavery to destruction and death, to God, for the sake of the world. Jesus sent his demons into the pigs, and immediately the man was clothed and seated and in his right mind, neither an animal nor a god, but a man, made in the image of God.

God
Gerasene Man
Creatures (including pigs)

The Bible says that Jesus is the only mediator between God and humanity. He is God's ambassador of reconciliation. *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Cor 5:21). Through Jesus, we can be reconciled to God.

At the end of the day, that's why we need Jesus as our mediator. We need to come back under God's authority. Because ultimately the problem of sin is not that we have violated the Ten Commandments or any other ethical system. Ultimately, we have violated the intimacy of our relationship with God. We've cheated on him and taken another lover. So we need a mediator in order to be reconciled to God.

There is only one way to be reconciled, but it's a way that is open to you and to every person, no matter what religion or ethnicity or sexual history or political party. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Give him your allegiance and enjoy reconciliation with God.

Then whenever you find yourself struggling with idolatry, trust Jesus again, not only as your redeemer, but also your interceder, because he lives to make intercession for us. He is constantly pleading for us before the Father, as Moses did again and again on behalf of his people. Through Jesus, we can remain reconciled to God in spite of our failures along the way.

Phase 4. Restoration. So now we come to the end of Moses' intervention and to the end of Exodus. This is the Restoration phase. If the Golden Calf was the nadir of Exodus, then this is the pinnacle. It's a happy ending showing restoration as the fruit of reconciliation.

In Exodus 34, God restored the covenant. He gave Moses new tablets with the Ten Commandments, and he reiterated to Moses what he expected in terms of marriage vows. This whole chapter is evidence that God had truly come around. He wasn't going through the motions while holding a grudge. He was genuinely eager to engage in full relationship with Israel.

Then in Exodus 35-40, the people responded in obedience. In Ex 35, the people brought their gold and silver and bronze, fabrics, oil, etc. And in Ex 36, Moses told them to stop, because they had more than enough to make everything that God had envisioned. And then in Ex 37-40 they made everything as directed, and with God's help they completed the Tabernacle beautifully. And this was all evidence that Israel had really come around. They were genuinely back, in full relationship with God.

Finally, when everything has been built according to specification:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus

40:34 ESV)

Hallelujah, God was with his people as they set out on mission to the world. Praise the Lord who saved his people from death and destruction, to himself, for the sake of the world!

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appeared in all his glory on the mountaintop, just as he was in the transfiguration before his death. And here he gave his followers a promise:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

Hallelujah, as he sends us out for the sake of the world, Jesus promises to remain with us forever, wherever we go! Praise the Lord! Hail King Jesus! Through him, we are delivered from death and destruction, to God, for the sake of the world.