

The Power of One

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Exodus 32:1-14, 30-35

I really think a person could spend years in Exodus 32-34. I've revised how I'm going to finish up this series on the Book of Exodus, as I've spent time in these three chapters. Today we're in Chapter 32. If you'll remember two weeks ago, when we were here before, the Israelites had entered into a covenant with God only six weeks, when they found themselves breaking their covenant vows and committing spiritual adultery; that is when they made the golden calf. And we talked two weeks ago about "a lot of bull," if you'll remember the subject. We talked about how God's people, sometimes trying to make their deity more user-friendly, more consumer conscious, broke God's law and broke God's heart. And God decided he was going to destroy the people. And he would have except for a man named Moses. One man out of two million who stood in God's way and said, "I want you to rethink what you're planning to do." What we're talking about this morning is the ministry of intercession. Intercessory prayer. I didn't plan it to fall on the Sunday before the National Day of Prayer. But yesterday it dawned on me, "God you've got us on your timetable. You're calling us to intercede for the nation." And I can't think of a better chapter in all the Bible to call us then this one.

In chapter 32:1-6, I won't reread it, but this is the account of how the people, with their high priest Aaron, made an idol, a golden calf, and they said, "this is the God who brought us out of Egypt, this is Yahweh in a graven image." I'm going to pick up the reading at verse 7. Moses is on the mountain with God, the people are in the valley with their golden calf.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone <that's an interesting quote from God, "leave me alone."> so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent <the old translations say "repent"> and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the Lord relented <the older translations say "the Lord repented"> and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Skip over to verse 30. Let me just complete the part of this intercessory prayer on which we're going to focus this morning.

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." The Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin." And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

Moses is practicing shuttle diplomacy. If you read Chapters 32-34, he's going up and down this mountain, time after time after time. I haven't counted the times but it must be 5-7 times. He goes up the mountain to talk to God about the sinful people, then he goes down the mountain to talk to the sinful people about the holy God. Then he goes back up to tell God what the people said. Then he goes down the mountain to tell the people what God said. Back and forth. Shuttle diplomacy. Its a picture of the ministry of intercession. Where a man or woman stands between a holy God and a sinful nation and tries to bring the two together. That's what Thursday is all about. Its a day of intercession for a sinful nation and a Holy God. You see, Moses is praying to God that God won't do what God says he's going to do. I don't think I ever really understood intercessory prayer until I spent time in Exodus 32. To be honest with you, I've spent a lot of time in Exodus 32 and I'm still not sure I understand intercessory prayer. But I think differently than I used to think. Because, I used to think intercessory prayer was when you piously and submissively and maybe passively went into your prayer closet and said, "Dear God, I know you are sovereign and I know you have a sovereign plan for the earth and for the nations. And if I could just find out what you're sovereign plan is that you've already prepared, then my job is to submit, surrender, and sorta resign myself to what you are already going to do. Que sera sera, whatever will be, will be." But, when I began to read chapter 32, I realized, that may be how Muslims pray. That may be how people pray who believe in astrology and fate. But that is not how Christians pray. When I look in these chapters I realize that intercessory prayer is not some passive submission to fate. Intercessory prayer is a noisy, sometimes violent, shouting match between two wills who are in conflict. In this case, Moses and God. I don't know anything that will reveal the truth about your own theological presuppositions than intercessory prayer. When you get on your knees to pray for the nation it will reveal to you what you really believe about God, what you really believe about yourself and what you really believe about the will of God. When Moses went up on the mountain, he did not say this, "Lord, I heard you when you said 'leave me alone' and that you're going to destroy this people. Therefore, obviously, your will is already made up. Therefore my job is to surrender to your will." Moses didn't pray like that. He heard what God said, and he looked God in the face, if you can even picture it this way, and shook his finger and said, "God settle down a moment, don't do something you might regret." Then I go back and and reread it and I say, "is that really what its saying?" Somebody's thinking, "yeah, but in the Garden

of Gethsemane we have another picture of prayer, where Jesus says, “not my will, your will be done.” That is correct. But Jesus came to that point in his prayer after hours of sweating drops of blood in agony, in conflict, over one will against another will. “Let this cup pass.” Three times he prayed it. As I’ve spent time in Exodus 32, I want to outline 5 radical truths about intercessory prayer. This stuff is radical. This will test your theology to its depths. 5 truths about intercessory prayer. Truth number 1 relates to the nature of intercessory prayer.

Truth #1: The Nature of Intercessory Prayer

The nature of intercessory prayer is wrestling with God. Struggling with God. When we come to God and say, at the first part of our prayer, “not my will but thine be done.” It may sound holier but most of us pray that way, frankly, because its easier. God wants us to wrestle with him in prayer. Remember Jacob, in Genesis 32. Another chapter that will test your theology. Where all night long Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord, saying, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.” And that rascal Jacob got what he asked for. Its amazing. He got the blessing of God. Now that’s what I see going on between Moses and God on the mountain. Moses goes up the mountain, and this is what God says, and its almost comedy (jewish comedy). God says, “go down the mountain, Moses, because **your** people who **you** brought out of Egypt have become corrupt. Stand back, get out of my way, I’m going to destroy them. Leave me alone.” Moses looks at God and says, “**my** people, who **I** brought out of Egypt? They’re **your** people, who **you** brought out of Egypt.” Its almost like Moses and God are having an argument over who is really responsible for that bunch of people down in the valley. Moses knew who was responsible. God knew who was responsible. He was. He was inviting Moses to enter into a conflict of wills by telling Moses up front what he wanted to do, “I want to destroy them.” Moses goes back to God and says, “Lord, think again.” Moses even has the audacity to tell God to repent in verse 12. We’re going to talk about that word a little more in a moment. I know its one thing when God tells a man to repent, but when a man tells God to repent? I mean, think about this. I’ve been to a lot of prayer meetings in my life and I’ve never heard one person pray to God “repent.” But that’s what Moses is doing. The word repent simply means, “change your ways, think again, change your behavior, God.” Do we have a clue what intercessory prayer is all about? You see, the ministry of intercession is not a call to come and piously submit to God’s sovereign plan that can never be changed. The ministry of intercession is a call to come and wrestle with God. And when you wrestle with God, frankly, you can’t always predict what the outcome will be. Go through the examples in Scripture, sometimes man wins, sometimes God wins. But it is a wrestling match. I simply want to say that on Thursday if you’re coming into this room to pray for the nation, and you’re going to say, “Lord, you’ve obviously already decided what you’re going to do with America. I’m just going to submit to whatever you do. And just may your will be done. Que sera sera, whatever will be will be.” Just stay home. Don’t come. You’ll waste God’s time and yours. A call to intercessory prayer is a call to understand the nature of intercession is to wrestle with God. Its to tell God, “I know what you’re thinking and I know what you’re planning and I want you to reconsider.” That’s scary praying. Do we know what prayer is like?

I grew up in a generation where we used to have elderly ladies particularly in the community who

were called “prayer warriors.” I used to think, oh yeah, prayer warriors, they are waring. Who are they waring against, who are they struggling with? The devil. They’re fighting against the devil. I’m getting to a place where i’m thinking, to be a prayer warrior - there’s a part that is wrestling with Satan - but a real prayer warrior, like Jacob, like Moses, like Jesus in Gethsemene, is somebody in a wrestling match with God. I used to hear these dear lady saints say, “we’re going to storm the gates of Heaven.” Think about that phrase. Why do we need to storm heaven? I mean, Heaven is a great place to be. Because they understand what that means. The nature of intercession is wrestling with God. I put on the front of your bulletin a quote from P.T. Forsyth. Something that has challenged me for years. “Sometimes God’s will is that we surmount His will.” Think about that. Sometimes God’s higher will is that we resist his lower will. God is inviting Moses to hear what God’s will is and then to resist it. The nature of intercessory prayer is when we wrestle, struggle, with God.

Truth #2: The Power of Intercessory Prayer

Let’s talk secondly about the power of intercessory prayer. **The power of intercessory prayer is that one man, standing in the gap, can change the course of human history.** One man, standing before a holy God, can change the way God works. This is revolutionary stuff. The power of intercessory prayer. There were 2 million Israelites and Moses. Moses goes up on the mountain and one man changed the course of human history. One man, if I can dare to say it this way, caused God to change his mind. Its almost as if, when God told Moses I’m going to wipe them out. Moses says, “Not so fast, big guy. Let’s think about what you’re saying.” The power of intercession, to use the Biblical language, is that it may result in God “repenting.” Look again at verse 14, my New International Translation says, “then the Lord relented.” Now with all due respect to people who are far smarter than I in the original language, I want to say to them, “you wimped out!” The real language of Scripture is the same language that is used for what sinners do when they turn from their sin. They repent. This is the very same word used for God. Now, we know God is not a sinner. He doesn’t need to turn from sin. But the word repent means to change, to turn, to change your mind. In fact, that’s how the New American Standard translates it, “God changed his mind.” The power of intercessory prayer - are you listening to me church? If I understand Scripture - is that our prayer can cause God to change His plans. Now if that doesn’t blow your theological circuits, I don’t know what will. You mean one man saying prayers to a holy God, on behalf of 2 million people, can change what God will do? I thought God was sovereign. How audacious to think that prayer can change God. I know that prayer might change me. But to think that prayer might change God? In case you didn’t recognize it, this is not the only place in Scripture where God repents. Get your concordance out, your King James Concordance, and you can track them down, the first place is in Genesis 6:6. When after God has created the world, he looks at earth and every intention of every man’s thought is only evil all the time and the Scripture says “and God repented that he ever made man.” God said, “what was I thinking when I did that?” I’m not sure that’s an accurate translation, but that’s not far. That’s when he sent the flood and wiped them all away except for Noah.

Or in the 15th chapter of 1 Samuel, where God had sovereignly chosen Saul to be the King of

Israel. And then Saul behaved like a wild man and what does God say, "I repent that I made Saul King. What was I thinking? He's not king anymore, now I choose David." And I want to say, "God is that how deity is supposed to behave? Do you really change your mind? What kind of universe is this?" Let me just say, at this point, for intercession to be effective, you have to know God really well. You have to have a relationship with God that you know his heart, you know his will.

Let me tell you my favorite example of God's repenting and it comes in what I believe is the funniest book in all the Bible, the Book of Jonah. God told his prophet Jonah, "Jonah, go to Ninevah and give them this message. 40 days and you guys will be destroyed." Now Nineveh was Israel's enemy, you would think Jonah would say, "oohh..that's a great message to give to my enemies, 40 days and you guys are going to fry." But what does Jonah do? He gets in a boat and goes West rather than east. Ninveah was east. He goes west. God finally gets his attention by sending a whale-a-gram. Jonah sits in the gastric juice of a whale for three days and he comes to his senses. And he says, "well, maybe I'll obey God after all." Well the whale has enough of this nauseating prophet and vomits him up and Jonah goes off to Ninveah. He stands in downtown Nineveh and gives his message. "40 days and you guys are going to be destroyed." You know what happens? The Ninevites repent. That's what it says, they say, "we're sorry God; we're going to change." You know what happens in the next verse? God repents! He says, "ok, I'm not going to destroy you." You know what happens in the next verse. Jonah goes out and sits under a tree and pouts. And God comes to Jonah and says, "Jonah, why are you upset?" And Jonah says, "I knew you were going to do that. That's just the kind of God you are. If I preach to them and they repent, then you don't burn them up. That's why I ran away. I knew you were like that." Its a very funny book. God can change. If I understand what the Scripture is saying about the call to intercession. Its the call to ask God to change his mind.

At this conference on revival I went to a couple of weeks ago, I heard Henry Blackaby almost say, its too late for America. That America has gone so far down the road in her rebellion against God, is it even conceivable that God could do anything with us but destroy us? I heard someone else say, if God doesn't send judgment on America he owes an apology to Sodom and Gomorrah. Is it too late? One of the calls to intercession on a day like the National Day of Prayer is to say, "Lord we haven't built one golden calf in America, we have a plethora of golden calfs in America. And we know what you want to do to a people who worship idols and we're asking you not to." Can you come and pray with that kind of mindset. Recognizing the power of prayer, intercessory prayer, is the power to ask God to not do what he was planning to do and to do what he was not planning to do.

Truth #3: The Content of Intercessory Prayer

Let's talk about a third radical truth. This relates to the contents of prayer. What do you pray? When most of us gather. in our prayer meetings and intercede or petition God, the truth is, most of us have a personal agenda. It may be something like this, for example on Thursday, "Lord, please save America, because if you don't save America my health care insurance is going to be lost and my retirement plan. I don't know what's going ot happen if America folds." God's not

interested in intercessory prayer like that. God's not interested in people who come to him with an agenda for their own private welfare. And that's why they want God to change the universe. Listen to how Moses prayed. It moves me. Verse 12. What does Moses tell God? Does he say, "don't destroy these people because I'll lose a job. I won't have a job, if you destroy those people." He says, "Lord, think about this. What will the Egyptians say if you wipe them out? Do you know how many speeches I had with Pharaoh telling him what a great God you are and how glorious you are. If you burn these 2 million Israelites up, what are the Egyptians going to think about you?" I think God gets very tender when we pray like that. Because, God cares what the Egyptians think about God. And God wants us to care about what the nations think and what God's reputation is. Moses is saying to God, this is not about us. This is about you and your reputation and your glory. The nations are going to laugh at you, if you can't get us to the land of our inheritance. I think God listens when we pray like that.

The second thing Moses said to God, verse 13. "God, do you remember, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Remember those guys? That was 400 years ago. Remember what you promised them on oath by your own self? You promised our ancestors that you were going to make their ancestry more numerous than the stars and that you were going to give them the land of canaan. Lord if you destroy us, what's going to become of your promises. God loves it when we remind Him of His promises. This is not about us, God. This is about you. If we don't know how to pray, thinking about the glory and the promises of God, then we don't know how to intercede. Let me mention a fourth truth about intercessory prayer.

Truth #4: The Cost of Intercessory Prayer

Let's talk about the cost of intercessory prayer. I go to prayer meetings and very often it goes something like this, "Dear Lord, bless all the missionaries, help all the sick, save all the lost, be close to all the lonely, bind up all the brokenhearted. Amen." You stand up and you say, "Now where are we going to ice cream after prayer meeting?" Is there a cost to intercessory prayer? I'm not opposed to ice cream after prayer meeting, that's not my point. My point is that if we are going to enter into the agony of God, we are going to have to make a choice to enter into the agony of God for a broken, bleeding world. That's why Moses said in verse 32, "Lord, if you don't forgive these people, well then just blot me out of the book you wrote." Anyone want to pray like that? That's why I think prayer meetings aren't well attended. Cause who wants to pray like that? Who wants to come here on Thursday and say, "Lord if you aren't going to save America, than just destroy all of us." Because that's the kind of cost God is looking for. That His people are ready to pay, when they come to him to intercede, to ask him not to do what He's planning to do. Because true intercession is always motivated by love. Moses loved those people. As much of a rascal nation as they were, Moses loved them. And Lord, you wipe them out, just wipe me out too. Its really interesting when you think about what God said and Moses said about blotting you out of my book. I want to say, Lord are our names written in your book in pencil? Can they be blotted out? God says, "I'll blot out the names of people who sin against me. Because, Moses, part of the cost involved in intercession is realizing as much as you pray or intercede, even if you give your life, it will not bring forgiveness for their sins. There is only one way to find forgiveness

and that is not through your death, and it is not through your intercession. I appreciate what you're doing and does affect the way I behave. But there is only one path for atonement for sin and that is through the death of Christ on cross and the blood of the lamb. There is no other remedy. And every individual must come to me and repent personally for their sins or God says they will pay for their sins."

Moses' prayers can change some things in God but they cannot bring atonement for sin. There is one God and one mediator between God and man, and that is not Moses, that is the man Christ Jesus who gave himself a ransom for all.

We've talked about the nature of intercession. It's wrestling with God. We've talked about the power of intercession. Its the capacity to cause God to change His plans. We've talked about the content of intercession. Lord, this is about your glory and your reputation, it's not about us. We've talked about the cost of intercession. It will cost us our very lives. It will cost us to enter into the agony of the world.

Truth #5: The Rarity of Intercession

Let me close by talking about the rarity of intercession. One man, out of two million people dared to intercede. I wonder how many people will dare to intercede for a nation of 250 million on this Thursday. God looks all over the nation, over and over in Scripture God says, "if I can find just one. Just one...I won't destroy them." I want to close by turning to Ezekiel chapter 22. I want to leave this with you and pray this with you as we close. There's about 5 places in the Old Testament where God says I'm looking for one. Just one. There's a nation of sinners but if I could find one man, one woman, who would stand in the gap, I'll spare judgement. Will he find those among us. Look at Ezekiel 22:30. This is a passage written about Jerusalem and her many sins and judgement is imminent. Listen to the cry of God. God is speaking.

I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it <In other words, he's looking for an intercessor. He's looking for someone, if I can dare to say it this way, someone to stop him from doing what he knows he has to do. and in Ezekiel's day, a tragic tragic verse> I found none.

There wasn't even one who would resist my will. Who would resist the judgement that is coming. I want to say to the family of God this morning that God is looking for men and women who will stand in the gap for our nation, for our families, for our church, for our city, for our world. I feel sometimes that God looks in vain. Are there any of us who are willing to play that role?

Would you bow your heads with me as we close? As our heads are bowed, I want us to allow God's Spirit to drive this home into our hearts. I want to just guide us in a time of prayer.

Lord God, I don't come close to having theological comprehension of everything that is

recorded in Exodus 32. I can't put it all together. But, if I read your word correctly, and not just in this chapter but in many places of Scripture, I recognize that you, for some sovereign reason known only to you, are wanting men and women who will stand up and say, "Lord, don't do what you're about to do." Or someone who will stand up and say, "Lord, I want you to do what you weren't even planning to do." Father, that just blows my circuits. In Ezekiel's day, you were looking all over the nation, for just one man or just one woman, who would stand in the gap, who would pay the cost, who would do the shuttle diplomacy, going back and forth trying to bridge the gap between a holy God and a sinful people. I won't destroy the land if I can find just one. Lord, these are crucial days for our nation, for our families, for our church. Judgement is looming on the horizon because of our sins, because of our apostasy, because of our idolatry, because of our rebellion. You're calling your church, your people, to stand in the gap. Father, would we hear the call? Would we respond? Would we be willing to pay the price necessary? Father, speak to our hearts this morning. I pray that out of this room, in this congregation this morning, that there would be dozens, scores, maybe more, of men and women who would have the guts to say, "Lord, I want to be an intercessor." I want to be someone who stands in the gap. I want to be someone who wrestles with you. Father call us we pray to go deeper and further. Give us faith to know how to pray. Make us like Jacob who wrestled all night saying, "I won't let you go until you've promised to bless me." Raise up that kind of godly and gutsy men and women who know how to pray in a way that changes the very heart of God. In the name of Jesus we ask, Amen.