

ON EAGLES' WINGS

XII. "Moses: Intercessor"

1-22-06

Ken Peterson

Exodus 31:18-32:24

INTRODUCTION

After the great American author, Ernest Hemingway was wounded in World War I, the doctors pulled 237 pieces of shrapnel out of his body. The convalescent period was long and involved a lot of waiting for healing to take place. He began to notice that some of his fellow hospital patients seemed to grow inwardly stronger through this stressful, often painful waiting. Others were shown to be shallow and immature. Hemingway concluded that in every case, the waiting brought out the true nature of the person. Those with strength of character revealed their real strength. Those who were self-absorbed and undisciplined responded with anger, petulance, and self-pity. From this experience, Hemingway developed the basic story line of his novels. He would put seemingly "good" people in difficult situations in which they were forced to wait, as in The Old Man and the Sea, revealing what they were really made of. Hemingway claimed that waiting does not break people, but reveals them—uncovers what is really there under the facade that looks so good.

We understand the truth in that, at least everyone does that has been tested by serious waiting:

- waiting for God to provide the right person for you to marry and then when you find the right person, waiting for marriage for sexual relations;
- waiting for God to answer prayer in His way and His time;
- waiting for healing that seems too long in coming;
- waiting for sorrow to give-way to joy;
- waiting for peace.

The temptation is do something to end the waiting, to make something happen. When we wait, we are not in control. And most of us can probably think of bad consequences we've experienced because we decided to quit waiting for God and do it our way. Writer and pastor, John Buchanan, captures the emotional difficulty when he writes that this kind of waiting is "like an unfortified city, begging for vandals, plunderers, ghosts."

That's one of the factors behind our Scripture this morning as we conclude our series on Exodus. Israel has experienced God's spectacular, miraculous deliverance from an impossible bondage in Egypt. On the journey they have the daily miracle of manna from heaven. Standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they've heard God's affirmation and statement of purpose for them,

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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.' (Ex 19:4-6)

God has already given them the laws to guide their relationship with Him and relationships with each other in the Ten Commandments. They have all agreed to obey those laws in a covenant sealing ceremony. Lest you get confused, the events in today's sermon actually take place before the events we covered last week in the building of the tabernacle.

Now, Moses has gone up to the top of the mountain, along with his aid Joshua for 40 days getting the commandments inscribed in stone by the finger of God and all the instructions for worship with the detailed plans for the place of worship, the tabernacle. Right in the middle of this, we have three chapters dealing with this sordid scene of worship before a golden calf.

READ Ex. 31:18-32:24

TEMPTATIONS IN WAITING

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." (Ex 32:1)

Forty days is a long time for a crowd to wait, especially when it is an open-ended waiting. They weren't told it would be forty days— they didn't know how long it would be, or if Moses and Joshua would ever return. I'm sure there was lots of speculation. Perhaps a lion surprised them and killed them. Others, thinking of how badly they'd treated Moses, grumbling against him whenever things didn't please them, wondered if he hadn't just slipped around the other side of the mountain and abandoned them. When someone is absent from us, guilt and fears multiply, don't they?

And, when an authority figure is gone, things can begin to run wild. A teacher with a well-disciplined classroom may leave the room for 5 min. with little consequence. But what happens after a half hour? Usually things are falling apart, aren't they? The same can be said for the need of a police presence in our communities or gathered crowds.

Thus it is, these Israelites have decided to end their waiting. They want to take charge. Aaron who had been left in charge was a weak, pliable, people-pleasing leader. But perhaps he too had his fears and misgivings about Moses' whereabouts. Certainly he feels the pressure to do something to hold things together. He knows they need a visible authority. In desperation, he draws upon their common past in Egypt. He gets them to be involved by giving their gold earrings and then casting them into a golden calf— much like one of the popular gods of Egypt, the bull-god, Apis. It may have been small and of solid gold, or perhaps a large carved wooden calf overlaid with gold. Now they were on familiar ground. They had something tangible and a god to fill the void they felt in the absence of Moses— a god familiar, to their liking.

And, I would suggest this morning that most of our idolatry arises out of a similar framework. We are dealing with an absence in our lives. We are not happy, we are fearful, we are confused, we are lonely, we have needs that are going unmet, and thus we create something we think will fill that void. Oftentimes we look to things to fill that empty place— another purchase, another

toy. I see people filling it with noise from ipods, TVs, music, or constant talk covering the terrifying silence. We can even place a person in an idolatrous position, trying to get them to meet needs only God is able to meet. Idolatry is one of the most subtle of all sins. Things that are good in their proper place can quickly become substitutes for God— things we trust to fill the place God has designed for His dwelling place in our hearts.

Dr. Craig Barnes, in talking about this scene at the Whitworth Institute of Ministry a couple of years ago, pointed out that Aaron may have meant this calf as a liturgical symbol, not an idol— something of a bridge from their past to the new. For, he does call for a festival to the Lord and sacrifices in accordance with the law. Whatever his motives though, it quickly became an idolatrous worship by the people. In fact, the word translated here, “indulge in revelry” often has the sexual connotations of the immoral orgies in the pagan worship of that day.

Our human nature in wanting to deny responsibility in sin is clearly seen in Aaron as Moses confronts him with his and the people’s sin. He rationalizes, “*You know how prone these people are to evil*” (32:22). In other words, it’s their fault, not mine. Then, this marvelous denial of any role Aaron had as he says, “*Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!*” (32:24). Can’t you picture a child standing next to a broken vase being asked by his mother how it happened saying, “I don’t know. It just fell over!”

While this is a terribly dark scene, in the midst of it we are treated to a scene of rare beauty and a stunning revelation of God.

MOSES THE INTERCESSOR

In the midst of this crisis over the people’s sin, Moses stands before God pleading for their salvation. Moses has finally become a real pastor to this contentious bunch of people. To catch the power of this, let me remind you of where Moses started in all this. He was exceedingly reluctant to accept God’s call to lead Israel. Remember excuse after excuse he offered at the burning bush. Then, each time the Israelites complained and grumbled to Moses (which was often), he complained to the Lord about them. Ex. 17:4 is typical of these exchanges. They ran out of water and quarreled with Moses demanding he give them water. *Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”* Each time these things happen, God patiently provides what is needed for the grumbling Israelites. Now it seems, the roles are reversed between God and Moses. God is the one ready to destroy the people and Moses is arguing for them. This is quite a transformation.

In this scene, Moses is a model of the power of intercessory prayer. In intercession, the person praying is praying (interceding) on behalf of another who is in need. The person being prayed for may have no interest in God or His help. But the intercessor is forging a link— like grabbing that person by one hand and grabbing God by the other hand. Here Moses stands before God and boldly makes the case before God for not destroying these stiff-necked, rebellious people. And, because of Moses’ prayer, we are told the Lord relented and did not bring the disaster on his people that he had threatened.

Moses came into the camp, and his anger burned, throwing down the stone tablets of the law,

breaking them to pieces— a physical demonstration of what had happened morally. After destroying the idol, forcing them to drink the gold powder, the Levites are engaged to destroy anyone who will not come over to the Lord's side. Sin always has dire consequences. All sin destroys life.

Now Moses rises to even greater heights of love and intercession as he comes back before the Lord.

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" (Ex 32:31-32).

In spite of the heinous sin of Israel, even though they are stiff-necked and rebellious, even though they've experienced incredible deliverances from the Lord and seem totally ungrateful, Moses is willing to so completely identify with them that he is willing to have his name blotted out of God's book— presumably referring to the roll of those who are saved. Here we are reminded of Paul in Rom. 9:3 where he says his anguish is so great for those Jews who are not saved that he would be willing to be cut-off from God if it would bring their salvation. We remember Jesus' intercession on the cross for his crucifiers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Moses has become a loving, committed shepherd to his flock.

Deep, committed intercessory prayer is incredibly powerful, as we see here— actually turning things around, saving the nation of Israel. This whole business of God relenting, seemingly changing His mind is difficult to understand. We can have difficulties meshing that with God's ways being perfect. There is mystery here, no doubt, and things we may never fully understand. However, I have wondered at times if God may not be, in a sense, testing Moses here. Offering to destroy Israel and start over with Moses is pretty heady stuff. If it is a test, Moses passes with flying colors. Even that offer doesn't cause his intercessions to be turned aside.

Chuck Sackett, who is now a pastor gives a powerful example of intercessory prayer. He says he grew up outside the church. But he was in Boy Scouts and wanted the God and Country award, even if it meant going to church. He attended a little church in the neighborhood just long enough to get his God and Country award. After jumping through the necessary hoops and getting his award, he quit the church. As he had walked by himself to the church each week, he had passed the Rinard's house. Later he got to know them as he did some yard work for them. Quite a few years later, Chuck finally became a Christian and went into the ministry. Now, 12 years after his God and Country award, Chuck was a pastor. He learned that Mr. and Mrs. Rinard were in nursing home nearby, so he decided to visit them out of friendship. After a delightful visit, he turned to leave, and one of them spoke up and said: "Do you remember when you used to walk to that little church? We've not missed one day since, praying that God would do something in your life." For 12 years they had prayed for him— this boy they saw walking to church. Chuck says he had no other Christian influence in his life. He credits their prayers, unknown to him, for his salvation and ministry.

Moses' intercessions go on. While God has agreed not to destroy Israel, He now says they can go on without His presence— that He will not go with them. Moses cannot accept that, to go on without God's presence, and continues on in prayer before God with Moses saying, *If Your*

Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here (33:15). And, in great humility, he cries out to the Lord, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you (33:13). Finally, he secures this promise from the Lord, My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest (33:14).

Now, we enter into one of the most remarkable revelations of God in the entire Old Testament. Moses asks to see God's glory.

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." (Ex 33:19-23).

Now, skipping a few verses to Ex 34:5-7:

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Notice the theme here of God's glory, this revelation of the Lord's nature to Moses, is dominated by mercy, love, compassion, grace and forgiveness. Moses receives this revelation because his heart has been prepared through persistent prayer, standing in the gap for his people. In humility he has asked to understand God's ways. And, God has given Moses a greater unveiling of His nature. Wonderful rewards await those who get to know God through prayer and love people deeply enough to hang-in-there in intercession until God's purposes are accomplished in their lives.

CONCLUSION

I believe each one of us has those for whom we are to be an intercessor like Moses. As we close, ask God who should be on that short list where you keep on with intensity until you see God's mercy and grace break forth into their lives. Don't be defeated by laziness or complacency. This is a life and death matter.

I believe God's intention for Israel during those 40 days was to let the emptiness, the waiting prepare them for a fuller revelation of God. Instead, they short-circuited everything by filling the space with gods of their own making. We too are prone to fill the times of waiting with the wrong things and miss what God has for us. Prayer is the answer to let God use the voids to His purposes, for it is through prayer we keep the God-focus we need.

Earlier we sang, “He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,” drawing it’s image from this final scene of God’s revelation to Moses. Our closing hymn, “Rock of Ages,” likewise makes use of this in a little different way, “Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let my hide myself in Thee.” The hymn writer realizes Christ is that Rock. Hidden in Christ, covered by His atonement, we can stand before God and see God.