

“HOW SOON WE FORGET!”
Matthew 22:1-14, Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23, Exodus 32:1-14
October 10 & 11, 2020

“An elderly man lay in a hospital with his wife of 55 years sitting at his bedside. ‘Is that you, Ethel, at my side again?’ he whispered. ‘Yes, dear,’ she answered.

“He softly said to her, ‘Remember years ago when I was in the Veteran's Hospital? You were with me then. You were with me when we lost everything in a fire. And Ethel, when we were poor—you stuck with me then too.’

“The man sighed and said, ‘I tell you, Ethel, you are bad luck.’”¹

After 55 years of marriage, I would expect this man to have other things to remember his wife for. What about their marriage? Their honeymoon? What about the children, their vacations together, the activities they shared, or the grandchildren? Was there nothing in poor Ethel’s life that was good?

Sadly, however, we have selective memory when it comes to the good things in life. The bad things are the ones that seem to stick boldly in our memories, while the good and the faithful and the true things get forgotten. And it’s as true today as it was in the days of Moses as he led the people to the Mountain of God, Mount Sinai.

Last week we looked at God giving the people of Israel the 10 Commandments, and their response was fear of the power and majesty of the Lord God. And as we look at the next 11 chapters, we see that **God had called Moses to the top of the mountain** so that He might give Moses two tablets of stone with the commandments written on them. These chapters also let us know that God had instructions for the people of Israel in many other ways, giving laws about altars to other gods, the treatment of slaves, the consequences of violent acts, the responsibility of owners, laws about restitutions (repayment), moral and religious laws, laws of justice and fairness, guidelines about the seventh year rest for the land and the seventh day rest for the people, regulations for the three great

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 145)

festivals that Israel was to celebrate, and promises and instructions about future travels and protections.

Moses was then given instructions about how to make the traveling tabernacle, with its three courts and the regulations and guidelines for all of the items within that meeting place. There were instructions about the Ark of the Covenant, and all of the furniture inside the Holy of Holies, where God would reside in the midst of the camp of Israel. There were instructions about the care of the eternal Lamp signifying the presence of God with the people. There were instructions of the making of the vestments for the priests who would offer the sacrifices to God within the tabernacle, as well as the ordination of Aaron and his sons for service as the Lord's priests. There were guidelines for the daily sacrifices, the burning of incense, and the making of all of the anointing oil and incense that was to be presented to the Lord. There were instructions as to who was to be the craftsmen to make all of these items. And once more there was the reminder of the Sabbath, the day of rest for the people to observe. There was a lot going on up on top of the mountain, and we are told that it took forty days for all of these instructions and guidelines and warnings to be given to Moses.

However, while Moses was up on the Mountain of God, **the people of Israel had nothing to do with themselves**. Day after day they watched the fire and smoke on the Mountain, they tended their flocks and families, and gradually they became so accustomed to the sight of God with them that they became bored with it, needing something else to do with themselves. And as we all have a tendency to do, when we don't have enough to keep us occupied, we get into trouble.

So here in Exodus 32, we see **what the people were up to** during this time. Listen to how quickly the people forgot what God had done for them since they were slaves in Egypt. This is Exodus 32:1-14. (READ Exodus 32:1-14).

Forty days can seem to be a long time when we have nothing to do. How fast did March and April go for you this year when everything was shut down because of the corona virus? When we have little to nothing to do with ourselves, time crawls by so slowly that we are ready to pull our hair out due to the boredom.

And it was true with the people of Israel. They had spent somewhere around 11 days walking day and night getting away from the Egyptians when they arrived at the site of the Red Sea crossing where God delivered them from the army of the Egyptians. And then we are told that they had spent over two more months traveling, keeping watch over their children and their animals and their possessions. They had side distractions of looking for food and water during that time, but as God led them through the Desert of Shur (Ex. 15:22), past the springs of Elim (Ex. 15:27), into the Desert of Sin, to Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-7), where the Lord God gave them water from the split rock in the mountains and then delivered them from the army of the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16), they finally traveled into the Desert of Sinai where the people camped at the foot of the Mountain of God, Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19:1, we are told that the people arrived at Mount Sinai on the third month after they left Egypt.

After all that travel, on foot, carrying everything they owned, plus their children and their flocks, you would think that the people would have wanted to put down camp roots for a while. But having spent all of their lives up to that point working every day at the service of their task masters in Egypt, they must have been so used to keeping busy that they didn't know what to do with themselves for forty days as Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments and the other laws and instructions of God. **Inactivity breeds restlessness**, and when the people got restless, trouble always followed.

We saw it in our own lives during the lock-downs in the past 7 months, too. Part of the reason for the rioting and demonstrating and looting and burning of buildings here in the US is a direct result of the restlessness of the people. When we are inactive, we forget quickly the blessings that we have experienced from the Lord. We are people who need a purpose in life, a meaning to our existence, and a reason to get up in the morning. When there is nothing for us to do – what with no work because of the lockdown – we get testy and fidgety and have to spend our time doing SOMETHING rather than just wasting away in boredom. Rioting and demonstrating gave people something to do, a purpose to fight for, and a reason to get up. But much like the people of Israel waiting for Moses to return, we often find ourselves searching for the wrong things in life when we don't have anything to do.

So **the people of Israel gathered around Aaron**, Moses' second hand man and brother, and they cried out to him, "*We do not know what has happened to this man Moses, who led us out of Egypt; so make us a god to lead us*" (Ex. 32:1). In one month's time, the people have forgotten how they got to Mount Sinai, and they have blanked out on Who was really the One who led them out of Egypt. They have become so engrossed in the mundane day-to-day rituals that they have lost their sights on the real purpose of being out there in the desert, camped at the foot of this fiery, smoky mountain. They have forgotten who they are, and Whose they are, so they begin to go after all the wrong stuff. And they want Aaron to make an image for them to relate to that they can call their god and that they can put their trust and faith in to lead them – wherever.

In his book, "*Forgive or Forget*," Perry Buffington, licensed psychologist, author, and columnist [Universal Press Syndicate (August 29, 1999)] wrote a description of what was taking place. He says, "Failures take on a life of their own because **the brain remembers incomplete tasks or failures longer than any success or completed activity.** It's technically referred to as the "Zeigarnik effect." When a project or a thought is completed, the brain places it in a special memory. The brain no longer gives the project priority or active working status, and bits and pieces of the achieved situation begin to decay. But failures have no closure. The brain continues to spin the memory, trying to come up with ways to fix the mess and move it from active to inactive status."²

What that means is that the people were there at Mount Sinai, with their bellies full, their thirst quenched and their enemies vanquished, so these memories are stored away, having been completed. **But their hearts longed for a relationship with One who is greater than they are**, a divine presence that could lead them and guide them and protect them and relate to them. Since the Lord God of Israel did not make Himself present to the people outside of the fiery cloud and the smoky mountain, the people longed for more, for a god they could feel and touch and see. Even while Moses is up on the mountain receiving God's laws and instructions so that the people could develop a relationship with

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg.87)

Him, the people are impatient and want something right now. They are unwilling to take the time to rest, to focus on this mighty, fierce and powerful God who could supply them with food and water and deliver them from all of their enemies.

So they were unwilling to wait for Moses to come down, and they start bugging Aaron to make a god that they could see and feel and give authority so that they could follow it. Though God had given them His Ten Commandments verbally not 40 days before that, the people were bound to break the first three commandments because of their impatience. They wanted another god, not the Lord God Almighty Who had brought them out of slavery. They wanted a god that they could see, so they demanded Aaron to make a god that they could relate to. They were searching for a god that could fulfill all their wants and wishes, one that they could see as it led them from place to place.

So Aaron chose a symbol of virility, of strength and of power – a bull calf – and he made it out of the most precious thing he could find, the gold from the earrings of all the people. Without leadership people fail, and without adequate leadership the people quickly turn away from God’s laws and start making up their own.

Hadn’t Aaron seen the miracles of God? Hadn’t he experienced the raw power of God? Didn’t he remember the mighty acts that the Lord had done for all of them to bring them out to freedom? Didn’t he remember the promises of God to bring them all to a land that they could call their own if they but trusted and followed Him? Why would he so quickly turn away from the Lord God?

Anyone in leadership knows how difficult it is to lead a people. When inactivity and restlessness becomes the normal way of life, the people cry out for more – right or wrong. And it takes a strong leader to stand up to the people and guide them in God’s way, especially when they are ready to abandon God’s ways and demand their own ways. Leadership becomes hard when there is a day-after-day demand from insolent people seeking purpose for their lives in all the wrong ways.

Aaron is not Moses, so when the people cry out to him to be the new leader and make new gods for them that will provide for them, Aaron quickly abandons what he knows about the Lord God, and

works to appease the desires of the people. So he melts the gold given to him by the people, and he fashions it into a golden calf, gives it to the people, and tells them, “*Israel, this is our god, who led us out of Egypt*” (Ex. 32:4)! Then he puts together an altar on which the golden calf sits, and invites all the people to prepare for the celebration of their new god. He says, “*Tomorrow there will be a festival to honor the Lord*” (Ex. 32:5).

There, a purpose for the people – to prepare for the celebration of their new god, the golden calf. So “*Early the next morning they brought some animals to burn as sacrifices and others to eat as fellowship offerings. The people sat down to a feast, which turned into an orgy of drinking and sex*” (Ex. 32:6). Everyone gets excited about getting ready to celebrate this feast, but it is for the wrong purpose. It is in blatant disregard for the Lord God’s commandments. It is in direct rebellion against all of God’s ways. But the people are so excited about doing something that they relinquish their inhibitions, they give up on their good judgement, and they forfeit common sense and they plow right into debauchery and sin. And there go the last six of God’s Ten Commandments.

Now it would be easy for us to say, “Oh, weren’t the people of that time fools for doing such a thing? Weren’t they idiots for abandoning God’s ways so quickly?” Before those words even form in your minds, however, look at our present time, when we in the US seem to be demanding the very same things that the people of Israel did. Many of the people in the United States are demanding that we rid our country of any semblance of God’s ways. They are demanding abortion on demand, even up to the very point when the child is born! They are demanding that we forsake the historical Judeo-Christian view of marriage being between one man and one woman! They are demanding the opening of our country to all people, legal or illegal, and call for the illegals to have equal rights with those who live here legally. They are demanding the abolishment of law and order, calling for the removal of those set apart to keep the law and order in our country. They are calling for the equalization of wealth among all the people, so that those who work hard have to share their incomes with those who don’t work at all. They have called for the closing of all churches and put stringent restrictions on any religious gathering

in the name of public safety. They call for the dismantling of our whole society because of failures that have taken place in the past. Total upheaval is being presented as being a good thing, when we know that without guidelines, anything goes. And even within the church, we are being encouraged to abandon our own biblical values to accept and accommodate anyone's wants and wishes.

We have become a restless and insolent people because of our own inactivity, and we must be careful because we are headed for the very same results that faced the people of Israel.

You see, while all of this was happening in the Israelite camp at the foot of the mountain, **God saw it from the top of the mountain** and began detailing to Moses what He was going to do with the stiff-necked people. *“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Hurry and go back down, because your people, whom you led out of Egypt, have sinned and rejected Me. They have already left the way that I commanded them to follow; they have made a bull-calf out of melted gold and have worshiped it and offered sacrifices to it. They are saying that this is their god, who led them out of Egypt. I know how stubborn these people are. Now, don't try to stop Me. I am angry with them, and I am going to destroy them. They I will make you and your descendants into a great nation”* (Ex. 32:7-10).

Is God not also thinking these very thoughts against us here in the United States? Is He not preparing destruction on ALL the people who have rebelled against Him? Does He not hate all our ways that reject His commandments and instructions? Yet we happily choose blind ambivalence and go on our happy ways breaking all of His commands and belligerently holding our fists up to Him and saying, “Bring it on God, I dare you!”

Don't we know the fierce anger of the Lord? Don't we remember all of His goodness poured out to each one of us? Don't we recall the deliverance we have received from those who would enslave us and demand our allegiance to them alone? Don't we know the awesome power of an angry God? Yet we are insistent upon our own ways, ways that disrespect and disable and disassemble all of God's laws and commands. We prepare ourselves for a great feast before the gods of our own making, and we forget that God is the One who is really in control of this world. People, don't turn away from the Lord

God, for when He becomes angry, who can stand in His way to prevent Him from accomplishing all that He has purposed against us?

Aaah! **But there are some who can change the heart of God.** That day on Mount Sinai, Moses interceded for his people, stiff-necked and stubborn as they were. He reminded God that these were His people, the ones that He had delivered from slavery, whom He had promised to make into a great nation for Him. Moses rationalized with the Lord God Almighty, explaining how wrong it would be for God to destroy His own people so that their enemies might accuse Him of planning it all along to destroy them. How could these people become His great people if God were to destroy them even before they received His laws and commandments? How could God be glorified by His people if they were destroyed rather than being allowed to repent and become sanctified by God's own love?

Moses intervened for the people, allowing God's great anger against them to abate. That did not prevent them from receiving punishment for their foolishness, but it prevented them from total destruction. That punishment brought back into stark reality Who God Is, and What He Demands of us.

People of God, followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, **we need to get on our knees before God to repent** of our sinful ways, to call upon the name of the Lord, and to seek His forgiveness. We need to call out to Him for His great mercy as we turn away from our foolish ways and begin to follow Him once more. Unless we do this, we stand ripe for the wrath of God to be poured upon us for the rebellion we have instituted against Him. We need to call out to God for His intervention in the things of this world, so that His Ways and His Laws and His Commands will once more be lifted up and respected AND OBEYED by everyone. Only then, will we find the blessings of the Lord shown to us again. Only then will we find God relenting from His great anger against us, and find His favor once more. Only through the confession of our sins, individually and collectively, can we even hope to find God's love and blessing poured out to us again.

Jesus Christ has already provided us with the way to forgiveness, but unless we humble ourselves to Him in all our ways, we will not find the presence of the Lord with us. Let's pray...

Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do. We abandon all Your ways and call them bad. We lift up all of our own ways, and call them good. But our goodness is far from Your goodness. Our ways are so far away from Your ways. Forgive our arrogance in thinking that we know better than You. Forgive us for the times when we have stiffened our necks and refused to follow Your ways. Forgive us for thinking that we can best rule ourselves apart from Your Laws and Commandments.

Father God, Lord of all heaven and earth, we beseech You today to have mercy upon us. Cleanse us from all our sinfulness. Wash us clean from all our iniquity. Wipe away all our filth and redeem us once more. Destroy all those who strive to lead us away from You! Eliminate all who teach and promote what is against Your perfect Law.

And then, O Lord, empower us to live bold lives following after the teachings of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, so that all may come to know Him as the One who has redeemed us and claimed us as His own. Come, Lord Jesus, into each one of us. Come, Holy Spirit, and move us to be the people of God, in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.