

## **For the Sake of Your Name**

### **On the Mountaintop**

The trouble with mountaintop experiences is that we always have to come back down. Moses is about to learn this the hard way. Here he stands on *the* mountaintop of Israel's history—literally and figuratively. The Lord has just rescued his people out of Egypt with his powerful, outstretched arm. The Israelites have just crossed the Red Sea on dry land, turning back only to watch their adversaries swept away by the mighty waters. Moses has led them to the foot of Sinai. He ascends the mountain to meet with the manifested Presence, to hear the covenant the Lord will make with his people. For forty days and forty nights he speaks with the Lord. But down in the valley the people grow restless. We pick up the story in Exodus 32.

While Moses dallies before the Presence, the people below speak the whole history of Israel's failure in a single request: "Come, make us gods who will go before us" (verse 1). The sheer man-centeredness of it all stuns the reader. Having just witnessed an incontrovertible display of God's breathtaking power, having just declared that they would follow God and keep his commandments, they fall headforemost into idolatry. "Make us gods who will go before us," they say. As if gods could be fashioned with human hands. As if we could form God in our image. As if God exists only to serve us—to "go before us."

The priesthood fails even before it has been consecrated for service. Aaron collects jewelry from the people to craft an idol. Moses highlights the humanity of the effort: Aaron "took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool." He gathered the materials. He made the idol. He fashioned it with a tool. This is not God; this is religious kitsch. But kitsch sells, and so does this. The Egyptians worshiped Apis; the Canaanites worshiped Baal. Both were

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pictured as bulls. Tragically, Aaron succumbs to the will of the people, who have themselves conformed to the surrounding cultures. The psalmist captures our amazement: “They exchanged their Glory / for an image of a bull, which eats grass” (Psalm 106:20).

Aaron then multiplies transgressions, ascribing to the work of his hands the glory due God alone. “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (verse 4). The audacity of the claim! *These* are the gods who delivered Israel? No, these are the earrings the Egyptians gave to Israel when God—the one, true Lord, Yahweh—made them favorably disposed toward the people so that the Israelites could plunder Egypt. Nevertheless the people are convinced, eager to forsake his unfailing mercy and embrace the ease of a man-centered paganism. Aaron equivocates, tries to dilute the seriousness of his sin with pious-sounding words: “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD” (verse 5). To the LORD, and not to mere idols. But piety is no match for revelry. The party starts at dawn.

### **Room for a Mediator**

The scene shifts abruptly. We are whisked to the mountaintop once more, where calm and devotion hold sway—at least for the moment. The Lord halts his revelation. “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt” (verse 7). Notice the Lord refers to Israel as “your people”—Moses’ people—and even declares that Moses brought them out of Egypt! It is as if the Lord has rejected Israel altogether and now will not even consider them as his people. He leaves off explaining the covenant to Moses. For, as Brevard Child reminds, “There is no purpose in continuing with covenant laws when the covenant has been shattered.”<sup>1</sup> What can he do? His anger smolders and he prepares to annihilate them.

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Old Testament Library). Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1974: 567.

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But he leaves room for a mediator. “Now leave me alone,” he says, “so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them” (verse 10). Leave me alone. Should Moses slink away, Israel will be no more. By soliciting solitude before the judgment, God allows himself to be persuaded. He implicitly invites Moses to remain and plead for mercy. This is prayer. This is intercession. And Moses is up to the task. For forty days and forty nights he fasts, prays, and agonizes before the Lord, fearing the wrath of God.

This much we have expected. We know the heart of humanity, how easily it turns to idolatry, even in the face of God’s unrelenting love. We know God’s holiness, his moral perfection turned righteous wrath when confronted with sin. None of this should catch us unawares. But what happens next might surprise.

Listen to the efficacious prayer of Moses from verses 11-13:

O 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 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 I will be their inheritance forever.

Note what he does not say. He does not remind God that humans are fearfully and wonderfully made such that destroying them would be a great travesty. He does not plead for mercy for the sake of the people. He does not promise that they will do better next time. He says none of this. He gives but a single, profound reason to spare Israel: God’s own reputation.

Moses gently reminds God that these are God’s people—not Moses’, as God had said earlier. These are the people that God brought out of Egypt with a great display of power. Now we come to the heart of it. Should God destroy his people, Moses asks, what will the Egyptians think? They will presume that God was either unwilling or unable to deliver his people into the Promised Land and so he

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destroyed them all together—to hide the evidence, I suppose. The destruction of Israel will diminish God’s glory in the eyes of Egypt—defame him, dishonor him—and that is reason enough for God to relent.

Perhaps even Israel itself—Moses and some righteous remnant—will lower their estimation of him for failing to keep his promises. Had he not promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would make them into a great nation, with land and descendants aplenty? But now he has said the same to Moses (verse 10). He gently prods God toward faithfulness to his covenant. “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self” (verse 13). You promised, remember? A great and glorious God does not break his promises. His good name would be tarnished if he did.

This is how Moses prays. The focus is not the people themselves. After all, it was man-centeredness that led them into sin in the first place. His prayer is God-centered from first to last. It is not for their sake. It is for his sake. For the sake of his name. God inclines his ear to prayers like these. “Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (verse 14). God holds back his anger and pours forth his mercy that he might be glorified.

### **In the Wilderness (Or How I Learned to Stop Complaining and Love the Lord)**

Fast forward a few weeks—the same story set to a different tune. Joshua, Caleb, and the other ten spies have returned from their foray into the Promised Land. The land is exceedingly good, they assure Israel. But the ten spies insist on the impossibility of military conquest. They even glimpsed the descendants of Anak in the land—giants living in fortified cities. Before great men like these the Israelites are little more than grasshoppers, easily brushed aside or stomped upon.

The grumbling begins: “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder.

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Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Numbers 14:2-3). Here we see the heart of all discontent and complaining: a lack of gratitude for what God has already done, and a lack of faith in what God will do. Have they forgotten already that *they* cried out to God for deliverance from the Egyptians (Exodus 2:23)? Rather than bless God for his gracious redemption, they curse God for stretching their faith. Had they not seen his miraculous power—blackening the sun, turning the Nile to blood, parting the Red Sea? How then could they doubt that he would deliver them again, defeating the Canaanites and fulfilling his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel? One marvels to see such hard-heartedness. (Of course, we who have seen the perfect plans and unfailing mercy of God meet with such wondrous glory at Calvary, have we not even less reason to complain, to doubt his goodness, to forego gratitude? I trust not.)

Moses and Aaron fall flat on their faces before the people. To pray? To show deference to the unhappy masses? Or simply for fear of the impending wrath? We are left to wonder. Caleb and Joshua tear their clothes in anguish and implore faith: "Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, *but the LORD is with us*. Do not be afraid of them" (verse 9, emphasis added). They remember what happened in Egypt; they know that the same God who brought them out of slavery will bring them into the Promised Land. How do the people respond to this show of submission, humility, and fearless faith? "But the whole assembly talked about stoning them" (verse 10). Mob mentality consumes them and they prepare to pour forth their unjustified indignation against God's humble servants.

But the glory of the Lord appears, the visible manifestation of the Presence. Like bickering, petulant children who fall silent before an approaching parent, the Israelites hush themselves. The Lord speaks, and in words eerily similar to those spoken on Sinai, he promises to obliterate them and turn Moses into a great nation. Doom would overtake them were it not for Moses.

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Again Moses stands between God and man. Again Moses begs for forgiveness. Again Moses pleads nothing but God's glory:

Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, O LORD, are with these people and that you, O LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, "The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert." (verses 13-16)

His only concern is the glory of God. The Egyptians will find out what happened. They will share their slander with Canaan. This God—the strange God of the Israelites—has appeared like no other. He has saved his people with a mighty hand. He goes with them, leading them by day and night. He has even been seen face to face, a Hebrew idiom for deeply personal contact.<sup>2</sup> The inquisitive awe is palpable. But if he should destroy them . . . whither curiosity? Rather than marvel at this God of Israel, they deride and dishonor him. Moses does not pray for Israel. He prays for God. He prays for the sake of his name.

### **For His Name's Sake**

By now we have begun to sense the pattern. The people grumble and sin. God grows angry and threatens annihilation. Moses steps in and prays, not for the sake of the people, but for his name's sake.

We are inherently selfish creatures. Jane Austen's Mary Crawford captures the predicament well, if irreverently, in *Mansfield Park*: "Selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope of a cure." We may quibble as to the cure, to be sure, but the disease she diagnoses acutely. This same selfishness that plagues our relationships, inhibits our service, and drives our sin, creeps into our prayer lives as well. Beginning with fine intentions and noble ambitions, we soon plead for flesh and

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993: 257.

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blood—our own skin, really—without giving so much as a moment’s thought to the glory of God the Father. Soon our devotional times degenerate into little more than spoiled children rehearsing their wish lists on the lap of the universe’s largest Santa Claus.

But it need not be so. In these prayers and those like them throughout Scripture, we apprehend the possibility of something more. We may lay aside our wants and desires to focus on what ought to be our utmost—his glory. God’s Word, if we will take the time to immerse ourselves in it, submitting to its teaching, provides the necessary corrective to our selfishness. It lifts our eyes from the earth below to the throne above.

I have nothing new to say, nothing innovative or original. I should worry if I did. We are simply returning to the elementary truths of Scripture—and in so doing, allowing for a fundamental reorientation in our lives and prayers. Not for us. For him.

Psalms 106, a song of national repentance sung as exiled Israel begins its return to the Promised Land, summarizes Israel’s saw-toothed history. The rebellion by the Red Sea. The golden calf. The worship of Baal of Peor. Meribah. Kadesh Barnea. Why does God continue to save such a stiff-necked, rebellious people? In this one psalm we find our unified theme of prayer to God’s glory. He notes Moses’ intercession, the role prayer plays in exalting God:

So he said he would destroy them—  
had not Moses, his chosen one,  
stood in the breach before him  
to keep his wrath from destroying them. (verse 23)

And he reminds us of Yahweh’s motivation in answering such prayers—that his fame and glory may spread to all nations, peoples, tribes and languages—lest we mistakenly believe it was for the people only:

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Yet he saved them *for his name's sake,*

to make his mighty power known. (verse 8, emphasis added)

Then concludes the history lesson. He moves to prayer himself, to intercession on behalf of the exiled captives wandering back to Israel. Prayer to God's glory. Not for their glory, not for their comfort or happiness back in Israel, though those may perhaps come. No, this is prayer that seeks the exaltation of the Most High God as he displays his mighty power and fierce love for all to see.

Save us, O LORD our God,

and gather us from the nations,

*that we may give thanks to your holy name*

*and glory in your praise.* (verse 47, emphasis added)

May God grant that we learn to pray like this. To his glory.