
Exodus 32:7-35, Moses and God in dialogue

Ephesians 4:22-27

Exodus 32 is a complicated chapter, which can be divided as follows:

- 1-6: Sin at the foot of the mountain
- 7-14: Moses stills the LORD'S anger – so no immediate destruction
- 15-20: Moses himself angry; breaks the tablets and the golden calf
- 21-24: Moses rebukes Aaron
- 25-29: Moses punishes the people
- 30-35: Moses acts as intercessor a second time (back on the mountain)
- 33:1-6: The LORD resigns: 'Go without Me'

We see that chapter 32 ends on a cliff hanger: Will God continue the journey with his people or not?

Aaron

When I planned this sermon series, I intended to preach on Aaron. But when I studied the passage this week, it became clear that he is only a minor character here. In verse 1, even the people recognise how insignificant he is: they pass him by when they need a leader. And in that they are right! Aaron may be the older brother, but as so often in the Old Testament God elects the younger brother for his service.

Aaron is not punished for his sin with the calf, but this chapter does not tell us why. Deuteronomy 9:20 tells us that Moses prayed for him. Already in this respect Moses acts as mediator.

Moses

Moses is the great character here, the one who has the courage to talk back to God.

It is a complicated story: First Moses manages to calm the LORD, then he himself explodes, then he calms the LORD again. Maybe he explodes because seeing something for yourself is worse than only hearing about.

In verse 11 God involves Moses in his plans and in verse 12 Moses calls God to repentance! And it works, God relents. Moses' arguments are: 1. What will the Egyptians say? and 2. God's promises to the fathers, the patriarchs.

Yet after calming God down, Moses still does gets very angry himself! He destroys both the golden calf and the tablets with the Ten Words. Is that justified? Yes, there is just anger. Moses defends his God. If we witness that the LORD is being dishonoured, we are right if we become angry. (But do not sin: Ephesians 4:26: "In your anger do not sin"; do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.")

When Moses intercedes with God again, in the second round (verse 32), Moses offers his life in exchange for that of the people. Paul does the same in Romans 9. In this self-giving Moses prefigures the sacrificial love of Jesus. No wonder Hebrews calls him the mediator of the first covenant. Yet a human cannot take another human's guilt. This situation points to the need for a mediator who solves the problem of sin: Jesus.

God

Verse 14 tells us that God changes his mind when Moses intercedes. It turns out that he is not a static character. He is faithful and always loving, but he can change his mind. Such a change of mind happens more often in the Bible, see for example the book of Jonah.

In this respect God is more like us than we might be aware. This openness is the space for our prayers: when we pray, God can change his mind! So we have reason to attend the prayer meetings on Thursdays.

And so?

Although God does not kill the nation, he does not want to journey with them anymore. The sin of the people brings separation from God. (As our sin also separates us from God and from one another.)

So the chapter ends on a cliff hanger: Israel has committed adultery – will God take her back and lead her again? To be continued
