

p 75 WEEK 10: COVENANT VIOLATION, INTERCESSION, AND RENEWAL

Exodus 32:1–34:35

The Place of the Passage

When God brought Israel to Mount Sinai, he communicated his covenant law to them (chs. 19–24) and showed Moses how to construct the tabernacle, which would provide a place for him to dwell among his people (chs. 25–31). In the present section, before Moses comes down the mountain, Israel breaks God’s law and thus jeopardizes their right to have him dwell with them. After Moses intercedes for the people, God graciously forgives their sin and reconfirms his covenant with them, thereby opening the way for Israel to build the tabernacle and enjoy God’s presence (chs. 35–40).

The Big Picture

Israel breaks God’s covenant law, but Moses intercedes for them and God graciously renews his covenant with them.

p 76 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the whole passage for this study, Exodus 32:1–34:35. Then review the shorter passages below and write your answers to the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 196–201; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. Covenant Violation (32:1–35)

In this section, the people’s covenant violation is presented as a distorted version of their covenant ceremony with God from chapters 19–24. In 32:1–6, which of God’s commands do they break? What other aspects from the earlier covenant ceremony are alluded to here? (For help, see Ex. 20:2; 24:3–11.)

In response to the people’s violation, God decides to destroy them and start over with Moses (32:7–10), but Moses intercedes and God relents (vv. 11–14). What are the two main reasons Moses gives for why God should relent? What is Moses primarily concerned with in this act of intercession?

Moses and Aaron are sharply contrasted in this chapter. First, whereas Moses led the people in the true covenant ceremony of chapters 19–24, here Aaron leads them in a mutated version, in

32:1–6. Second, Moses is singled out by God as the one to continue the covenant people (32:10), while Aaron is singled out twice as the one who allowed the covenant people to go astray (32:25, 35). Third, while Moses uses fire to destroy Israel’s idol (32:20), Aaron claims that it was the fire that produced the idol (32:24). These contrasts highlight Moses’ [p 77](#) faithful role as Israel’s mediator in this chapter. In what ways do Moses’ actions here foreshadow the work of Jesus?

2. Covenant Intercession (33:1–23)

Biblical writers often repeat information to emphasize a point. What information is repeated in Exodus 33:1–6? Given the flow of Exodus, why is this such a devastating problem? See Exodus 3:12; 19:4; 25:8 for further insight.

What information is repeated (three times!) in Exodus 33:7? How does this add to the tension introduced in the previous verses?

After Moses intercedes for Israel again (Ex. 33:12–16), God agrees to accompany them, despite their shocking lapse (v. 17). In response, Moses says, “Please show me your glory” (v. 18). In light of Exodus 24:15–17 and 29:43–46, why is Moses asking to see God’s glory here?

[p 78](#) In response to Moses’ request, God says that he will make all his goodness pass before Moses and proclaim his name, “The LORD” (33:19). Given the tension introduced in 33:1–6, what is the significance of God proclaiming his name here? (For help, review the discussion of “God’s Name” in Week 3.)

3. Covenant Renewal (34:1–35)

When Israel broke the covenant in chapter 32, Moses broke the tablets that had the covenant law written on them (32:19). In light of this, what is significant about God’s command to Moses in 34:1?

To confirm his forgiveness of Israel and his intent to continue on with them, God passes by Moses and proclaims his name (Ex. 34:5–7). What aspects of God’s character does this name proclamation focus on? What does this suggest is the grounds for God’s forgiveness of Israel and his determination to move forward with them?

After God reconfirms the covenant by reiterating various commands (34:10–28), this section ends by noting how Moses’ face would shine after he would enter God’s presence to speak with him (vv. 29–35). The apostle Paul notes that it was God’s “glory” that caused Moses’ face to shine in this way (2 Cor. 3:7). [p 79](#) Given the significance of God’s “glory” in this section, how is this a fitting resolution to this section of the book?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

GRACE FOR FAILURES. Shortly after committing themselves to obeying God’s law (Ex. 24:7), in this passage the Israelites show themselves to be wholesale failures at covenant keeping. By desiring other gods (32:1) and making an idol for themselves (32:4), they directly violate the first two commandments (20:3–4). However, despite this failure, God forgives his people based on Moses’ intercession and his own abounding grace. In interceding for the people and requesting God’s continued presence with them, Moses appeals five times for God’s “favor” (33:12, 13 [2×], 16; 34:9), which may also be translated as “grace.” God responds to this by reaffirming his intent to accompany Israel based on his “favor” (33:17) and by reconfirming his covenant relationship with them (34:10–28). In short, God forgives his people’s failures not because they get their act together, but because of his gracious and merciful character (see 33:19).

BEHOLDING GOD WITH UNVEILED FACES. When Moses descends the mountain, and anytime afterward when he speaks with God, his face shines brightly because of God’s glory (Ex. 34:29–35). Moses would veil his face when he left God’s presence, and he would remove the veil when he entered to speak with God again. Paul uses this passage to contrast the greater glory that Christians behold in the new covenant with Christ. Although the old covenant was glorious, it was limited because it did not enable the people to keep it. Paul says that “their minds were hardened” (2 Cor. 3:14), describing this as a veil lying over their hearts (v. 15). However, through Christ “the veil is removed” (v. 16) and we are able to behold God’s glory. The astounding news of the gospel is that this “veil lifting” through Christ is not accomplished by our own efforts, but by the transforming work of God’s Spirit (v. 18).

p 80 Whole-Bible Connections

STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE. Four times in this passage Israel is referred to as a “stiff-necked” people (Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9), reflecting the fact that they are inclined toward disobedience and impenitence. After the fall, humanity’s natural inclination has always been to rebel against God and not submit to his ways. During Noah’s time, every inclination of people’s hearts was “only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Later on, Moses foretells that Israel will continue in their rebellion after he dies (Deut. 31:27, 29), something that ultimately leads to their exile from the Promised Land (2 Kings 17:13–20; Neh. 9:29–30). In exile, the prophet Ezekiel is told that his audience will not listen to him because they have a “hard forehead and a stubborn heart” (Ezek. 3:7). In the New Testament, shortly after recalling the golden calf incident, Stephen calls his accusers “stiff-necked people,” saying that they “always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). Ultimately, this “stiff-necked” posture is due to fallen humanity’s unwillingness and incapability to submit to God’s law (Rom. 8:7), and the only cure for this condition is the gracious work of God’s Spirit giving us new life (Rom. 8:9–11).

THE NAME OF THE LORD. When God passes by Moses to proclaim his “name,” he gives him a full-length description of himself, focusing on his merciful, gracious, patient, and faithful character (Ex. 34:6–7). This self-description becomes a confession of faith concerning God’s character throughout the Old Testament. Several psalms recall this statement (Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8), as do Joel (2:13), Jonah (4:2), and Nehemiah (9:17). The opening of John’s gospel also alludes to this proclamation of God’s name. After noting that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John says, “we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, *full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). The first phrase recalls Moses’ request to see God’s glory (Ex. 33:18, 22), and the last is very similar to the end of Exodus 34:6, “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” This shows that the character of God evident in the Old Testament finds its fullest expression in the person of Jesus Christ.

Theological Soundings

IDOLATRY. The core issue in the rebellion at Mount Sinai is idolatry. Simply defined, idolatry occurs when we put something else in the place of God in our lives. In the case of Israel, they fashion a golden calf and credit it with God’s deliverance of them from Egypt (Ex. 32:4; compare 20:2). Then they mimic the covenant confirmation ceremony with God from chapter 24 by rising early in the morning, offering burnt and peace offerings, and eating and drinking (32:6; compare 24:4–5, 11). Paul cites this golden calf incident and encourages [p81](#) his Christian readers to learn from Israel’s errors and not be idolaters as they were (1 Cor. 10:7). However, idolatry is not limited to worshiping golden statues. God later condemns Israel for having taken “idols into their hearts” (Ezek. 14:3), revealing that anything we exalt above God—whether a statue or a desire of the heart—can fittingly be called an idol.

INTERCESSION. The catalyst for God’s forgiveness of the people in this section is Moses’ intercession. Four times in these chapters Moses intercedes for Israel, asking God to forgive their sin and continue to accompany them to the Promised Land (Ex. 32:11–14, 31–32; 33:12–16; 34:9). This focus on intercession that leads to forgiveness ultimately highlights God’s merciful heart: he is willing to forgive his people who have gone astray based on the appeals of another. This theological truth is shown forth most clearly through the intercessory work of Jesus. Because Jesus stands before God and thereby intercedes for his people, no one has grounds to condemn them (Rom. 8:34) and they are saved “to the uttermost” (Heb. 7:25).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Exodus 32:1–34:35 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

p 82 **3. Theological Soundings**

4. Exodus 32:1–34:35

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Exodus. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.