

The Great Apostasy

Pray

Lord, help me never to forget that You are holy, but also loving. Work in me today.

Read

EXODUS 32:1-24

Meditate

CONSIDER • Are you trusting in the power of your commitment to God, or in the power of his grasp upon you?

THINK FURTHER • It will trouble every Christian believer that the golden calf catastrophe could occur in the middle of the covenant-making. Israel's Liberator had already secured her future, swearing by his own name to bring her through to freedom and hope (3:14, also vs. 13-15). No enemy is coercing Israel to renege on her relationship with God (Acts 7:39-43).

Evil appears precisely when Moses is bringing back the marriage vows, the commandments, which are to be Israel's "I will," in answer to God's wooing "Will you?" (31:18). Israel then turns away, fearing a dull marriage, complaining that God isn't enough for her—meaning, of course, that he is much too much for her: too near for comfort with his searing holiness and impossible demands, too invisible, too serious about the exclusiveness of "forsaking all others." She turns from her beautiful lover into the arms of a flashy impostor. Israel replaces God with the popular bull cult, image of worldly power and

sexual potency: visible, portable, manageable, exploitable, with a colorful line in temple prostitution; a tailor-made god to suit the nation's mood (1 Kings 12:28,33). Are you deafened by the alarm bells this event sets ringing? At heart, our spiritual dilemma appears little different from theirs, beset by the sins of ingratitude and infidelity. Being the people we are, we know from long experience that we cannot commit ourselves to the Lord in a superglue sort of manner, a once-for-all irrevocable act. We try time and again but it never lasts. What we can do is commit ourselves into his hands (1 Thess. 5:23,24). A wobbly commitment it may be, but just enough to get us into the hands which can then take over, and will never let go as they fashion God's designs in us.

APPLICATION • Is God "enough," or "too much" for you? Have you "added" anything to your relationship with God? Ponder the price Jesus paid for your sins, and the scars on his hands that hold you, and turn to him now in new love and commitment. Will you share his great love with someone today?

Pray

"All to Jesus I surrender, Lord, I give myself to Thee;/ Fill me with Thy love and power, Let Thy blessing fall on me" (J.W. Van De Venter).

When Idolatry Implodes

Pray

Lord, may my heart be fixed on You, so that I will not fail You.

Read

EXODUS 32:25—33:6

Meditate

CONSIDER • “They rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:39).

THINK FURTHER • Reconstructing God into “the sort of deity I am comfortable with” is a highly dangerous project, like rewiring a nuclear reactor with the power turned on. It is tampering with the fundamentals of the universe, treating as absolute that which isn’t absolute; a catastrophic confusion at the heart of things. The lesson of the golden bull calf, including the awful punishment, is carried through into the New Testament as a warning to the reckless Corinthian church (1 Cor. 10:1-5). Not that God is damaged by any idolatry of ours! “A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word “darkness” on the wall of his cell,” said C.S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*. But idolatry is devastating for the individual and for his society. It is a fact of our nature that we tend to become like the thing we idolize; thus idols are “worthless” says Isaiah, scathingly, and their devotees are consequently “nothing” (Isa. 44:9). Lightweight gods spawn

lightweight people; Israel drank water contaminated with the debris of the calf (20). W.B. Yeats’ poem, “*The Stare’s Nest By My Window*” includes the line, “We have fed the heart on fantasies, the heart’s grown brutal from the fare,” capturing the self-destructiveness of false worship (32:1-16). Jesus summed up the spiritual chemistry of worship in his words, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). Your heart presses up against your treasure (which is the thrust and focus of your life, your driving ambition, your reason for living—your God or idol), and shares its destiny. If your treasure is temporal, earthbound, it will inevitably decay, taking the heart with it. But the God-centered life takes on the quality of God’s everlastingness.

APPLICATION • What “treasures” might you be storing up in heaven? Are there any “treasures” stored in your heart and life that you need to forsake? Will you let him be Lord of all?

Pray

Lord, I bring my heart and life to You. Remove earthly “treasures” that are there and reign supreme in my heart, so that I may truly be like Jesus.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Judges 9,10 / Mark 2

The Mediator

Pray Father God, through our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, I come to You today to hear You speak to me.

Read EXODUS 33:7-23

Meditate

CONSIDER • “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15).

THINK FURTHER • Have these people finally sinned their way out of the covenant? And, indeed, could it happen to us, inveterate idolaters that we are? But Israel has a mediator. Skillfully, tenaciously, audaciously, Moses intercedes for God’s “presence” (11-16). It is a start, but only Jesus’ full mediation, of the new covenant, can absolutely answer our anxieties about ultimate failure before God (Heb. 7:20-25). The essential difference between Moses’ and Jesus’ mediation is that Israel came to God through Moses but we come to him not only through Jesus but also in him. There is a vast world of grace in that little preposition. We pass through a door and leave it behind; but we live in the clothes we put on. Since we are, by grace and faith, in Christ, our status before God is as assured as Christ’s. Before God we are as Christ is, clothed with him.

We are like sick people, too feeble to offer God the worship, love, and obedience of our lives. A

Moses would come, prescribe medication, and depart until the next crisis. But Jesus, when he came, became the patient healing us from within. From within the full realities of our needy human nature he offered love, obedience, and worship to the Father (Gal. 2:20). The response we should make, Christ has already made in his life, death, and resurrection. He is our response to God (1 Cor. 1:30,31). In faith, our response is to the response he has already made on our behalf and in our name. We now live within the power and grace of his achievement; he is our perfection and our freedom from the futile tyranny of trying to achieve our own perfection.

APPLICATION • Let the reality of what Christ has done on your behalf sink deep into your heart today. No matter what you once were, Jesus has made you into a new creation—the old has passed away (2 Cor. 5:17). In what ways has he made you “new”? How can you show your love and gratitude to him in some special way today?

Pray Lord Jesus, thank You for doing in my life what I can never do—make me a child of God! May my life today bring praise and glory to God.

THROUGH THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: Judges 11,12 / Mark 3

God's Jealous Love

Pray

Lead me, Father, in Your way—even if I don't understand. Teach me to trust You for everything.

Read

EXODUS 34:1-17

Meditate

CONSIDER • “Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek You” (Psa. 9:10).

THINK FURTHER • By refusing God's mastery over her mind, Israel left herself wide open to future seduction. Now, for her healing, she is given God's name and his qualities (5-7), since a believer's defense against spiritual seduction lies in being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:1,2). Look at “maintaining love” (7): “love” translates the marvellous word *hesed*, meaning a strong, steadfast loyalty-in-love, which binds and holds God's covenant promises (Isa. 49:15). “By two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie” is an awesome statement of pure *hesed* at work in the covenant (Heb. 6:17,18). But there is also a tough uncompromising dimension to God's love: he is a “jealous God” (14; 20:5).

Do you delight in the thought of the Lord as the divine lover? Its corollary is that lovers react with jealousy, with “just indignation,” when betrayed. He desires to be all in all to his children, and has paid

an unimaginable price for the exclusive rights to their love and obedience (1 Cor. 6:18-20). He hates idolatry and its consequences, he loathes the impurity, vice, and injustice that draw his people from him, inflicting enormous harm. He is like a mother who is jealous for the well-being of her children. She hates playground bullies, poor teachers and inept local government; she rages against drug dealers, dangerous drivers and anything else that threatens the happiness of her family. She is even prepared to endure the wrath of her children in forbidding certain activities. God bears an image of us in himself; he is jealous for its realization in us as we grow towards it, hence his implacable hatred for “golden-calfism.” How else should a father respond when his children play with broken glass?

APPLICATION • “He leadeth me, O blessed tho't! O words with heavenly comfort fraught! Whate'er I do, where e'er I be, Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me” (Jos. Gilmore). Are you trusting him in and for everything in your life? Will you trust him in the difficult situations you may face today?

Pray

“Lord, I would clasp Thy hand in mine, Nor ever murmur or repine, / Content, whatever lot I see, since 'tis Thy hand that leadeth me” (Gilmore).

Reflected Glory

Pray

May I have a glimpse of Your glory, Lord, as I come into Your holy presence.

Read

EXODUS 34:18-35

Meditate

CONSIDER • The goal of the Christian life is “to look at him who is looking at you” (Augustine). Spend some time quietly returning his gaze.

THINK FURTHER • For order and rule within the covenant, Israel was given the Ten Commandments (1,28; ch. 20). The commandments work for us in three ways: (a) social and political—protecting societies against their own worst energies; (b) as a call to repentance—“the Law was put in charge [as “our disciplinarian,” NRSV] to lead us to Christ,” writes Paul (Gal. 3:24); (c) as a guide for the church. The limitations of the Law (it commands, but cannot compel) are vividly dramatized by the “veiled” glory with which Moses brought it (29-35). If salvation means receiving the grace to gaze unafraid towards the glory of the Lord, then the Law cannot save. But, says Paul, in a key interpretative passage I would recommend you place alongside today’s reading (2 Cor. 3:6-18), “Whenever anyone turns to the Lord [Jesus], the veil is taken away,” because he bestows the Holy Spirit. Within the dynamic of the Spirit flowing between God and his people, we

are able to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). The letter kills (the Law piles on the guilt), but the Spirit gives life. Within the life-giving Spirit, our contemplation of Christ becomes a transformation “into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.”

Trusting in the Spirit to write God’s Law on our hearts and minds, our part is to learn to stay within Christ’s gaze (Heb. 8:10). “Holiness consists in enduring God’s glance...the best thing would be to surrender our naked heart to the fire of this all-penetrating glance, the heart would then itself have to catch fire...it would be yielding, declaring oneself beaten, capitulating, entrusting oneself, casting oneself on to him. It would be a child-like loving...” (Urs von Balthasar).

APPLICATION • Moses’ face was radiant after spending time with the Lord. After your time of meeting alone with God in his Word and in prayer, how will those around you see in your life and face that you have been with God? How will you reflect his glory in your relationships today?

Pray

Lord, may Your Word and love fill my life today, so that the ones I meet and work with may know that I have been with You.

Responding to God's Presence

Pray

Father, holy God, I rejoice in Your presence—the God who in grace journeys with me in all of life.

Read

EXODUS 35:1-29

Meditate

CONSIDER • “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). What a friend we have in Jesus!

THINK FURTHER • Are we surprised that before the building of the tabernacle comes the command to keep the Sabbath (1-3)? This matches God's words regarding the Sabbath at the end of his instructions for the tabernacle (31:12-17), and so “Sabbath” words frame the central narrative on God's presence (32-34). For us, “Sunday” and “church” go together, but, in the language of Exodus, “Sabbath” is distinct from “tabernacle.” It is a household occasion, including servants and domestic animals: a time for sharing in God's enjoying of creation and for celebrating freedom; a time when all are set free from tasks that have to be done; a time for being, not doing, for enjoying relationships with God and with others (20:8-11). Even the building of the tabernacle is to cease on that day! Before details of work comes a command to rest and enjoy. Such is the grace of God: he commands enjoying freedom before giving a task. Further, this command can be kept anywhere, and every week, whereas the tabernacle is

localized and linked with annual festivals. The Christian church has long debated how to apply the Sabbath command, with various answers. Often, however, the central purpose has been forgotten and Christians become caught up in continuous work, even “church work.” God commands the enjoying of “doing nothing”!

But there is work to be done, and for this a variety of gifts are needed. All have a part—some bring raw materials, others skills. Men and women alike, leaders and people—each contribution is noted, and has its place in the whole. What a joy it is when people are “willing” and respond “freely, spontaneously” (5:21,22,26,29; Psa. 110:3), a response to the gracious presence of God.

APPLICATION • How well balanced is your life? How are you using your God-given talents, time and money to bring God glory? Are you doing it willingly and freely in joy? “Give of your best to the Master, naught else is worthy his love.... Give him your loyal devotion, Give him the best that you have” (W.B. Grace).

Pray

Forgive my half-hearted devotion, Lord. May I, in love and thankfulness for all You have done for me, give You the very best I have.