



SATISFIED IN HIM ALONE

SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

Exodus 32:15-35

Tenth Message

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In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye asks Golde, his wife of 25 years, a strange question, "Do you love me?" He reminisces: "The first time I met you was on our wedding day... my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other, and now I'm asking, Golde, Do you love me?" Golde does her own reminiscing about the less glamorous aspects of the past 25 years before saying, "I suppose I do." For most of us this is a very different attitude to marriage. Today most view the wedding day as the finish line after falling in love, engagement and all the wedding preparations. Beyond lies marital bliss! The couple is in love: they have eyes only for each other; they're satisfied in each other alone. But those days don't last. If the couple is not careful they won't begin the hard work of learning to love each other that comes from recognizing that the wedding day was not the finish line but the start line. Tevye and Golde had the advantage that their wedding day was clearly the start line. It was the beginning of learning to love each other within the protection of lifelong marriage vows.

Marriage is about lifelong commitment, about being faithful to one another through all the circumstances of life: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. Bound by loyalty and fidelity the couple learns to love each other.

Marriage is the one environment in which jealousy is appropriate. Jealousy is usually a negative trait, akin to envy and coveting. It's an inappropriate longing for something, tangible or intangible, that someone else has that we wish we had. It's often accompanied by fear, suspicion or resentment. Jealousy has wrecked many marriages. Yet marriage is the one situation in which jealousy is appropriate. Once a couple marry, their affections belong to each other within the marriage. Transferring them outside the marriage should arouse the jealousy of the jilted spouse.

The Bible frequently uses the metaphor of marriage to describe the relationship between God and his people. Our entry into relationship with God is the beginning of a lifelong journey of loyalty and faithfulness. Our affections belong to God alone. The Bible, in both OT and NT, uses the language of jealousy to describe God's demand for our undivided loyalty. Jealousy in its positive sense is predicated on relationship; it has no meaning outside of relationship. In the OT God expected undivided loyalty of Israel because he had entered into relationship with Israel: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." In the NT he expects undivided loyalty of Christians because he has entered into relationship with us through Christ: we are not our own, we've been bought with a price.

Last week we saw that within just forty days Israel had transferred its affections to a golden calf of its own making. It had broken the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." It had broken the second commandment,

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a

jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod 20:4-6 ESV)

This breach of allegiance had aroused God's jealousy and provoked him to wrath. These two words "jealousy" and "wrath" go together. The Lord said, "They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols" (Deut 32:21). Both jealousy and wrath arise from relationship: God's exclusive relationship to his people.

God had told Moses, "Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (32:10). But Moses did not leave God alone. He implored him to change his mind. God did so: he "relented from the disaster he had spoken of bringing on his people" (32:14). The people have been spared from complete destruction, but they are by no means out of danger. We pick up the story.

Moses's Anger (32:15-20)

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear." And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it. (Exod 32:15-20)

Much attention is given to the two stone tablets in Moses's hand; indeed this is the longest description of the tablets in Scripture. Both the tablets and the writing on them were God's work. Why two tablets? Because there wasn't enough room on one tablet for all ten commandments? That's how they are depicted in art, whether the Catholic and Lutheran 3+7 or the Protestant 4+6 or the Jewish 5+5. Lutheran and Protestant confessions state that the first tablet contains the laws pertaining to God and the second tablet contains the laws pertaining to mankind. It is much more likely that each tablet was inscribed with the full set of commandments. There were two identical copies, one for God, one for the people, because this was the treaty document binding God and his people together. The two copies were to be kept together in the ark of the covenant, the meeting point between heaven and earth, between God and his people.

Moses descended the mountain with these two copies of the treaty in hand. He rejoined his assistant Joshua, who remarked on the noise rising up from the people at the foot of the mountain. But Joshua misidentified the noise as the sound of fighting in camp. Moses corrected him: it's the sound of neither victory nor defeat, but of singing. This attention to the sound delays the story and heightens our suspense.

Finally Moses approached the camp. He burst into a flurry of activity with a long string of verbs attributed to him. He saw the golden calf and the dancing. Immediately his anger burned. The Lord had asked leave for his anger to burn, leave which Moses had not given him. Not so Moses: his anger kindled into immediate action. He hurled the two tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. Again, these are the two copies of the treaty. No sooner have they been made and handed over to Moses pending the manufacture of the ark of the covenant than they lie shattered to pieces. The covenant has been broken on the people's side.

Moses next enacted a strange ritual: he took the calf, burned it, ground it to powder, which he scattered on water and made the people drink. He immediately destroyed the object of false worship. This forbidden image suffered the indignity of being passed through the digestive system of all the Israelites and out the other end. But there's more to it than that. This action is similar to the ordeal prescribed for a suspected adulteress (Num 5). If a man suspects his wife of adultery, provoking him to jealousy, he is to bring her to the priest who will bring her before the Lord. The priest unbinds her hair so it hangs loose, makes her take an oath complete with curses that go into effect should she be guilty, writes the curses on a scroll and washes them off into holy water, which he makes her drink. This water is "the water of bitterness that brings the curse."

Moses doesn't administer this water of bitterness as a test. He has seen the calf and the dancing and heard the singing. It's clear what the people have done. They've been unfaithful to their covenant partner. They've engaged in idolatry, which so often in Scripture is described as adultery. Moses makes them drink the water as those who are clearly guilty.

Next Moses turns to Aaron.

Aaron's Weakness (32:21-24)

And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." (32:21-24)

Moses knows that it is Aaron who has brought this great sin upon the people. Elsewhere in Scripture and in the Ancient Near East this phrase "great sin" refers to adultery, whether literal or metaphorical. Aaron has brought on the people the great sin of covenant infidelity, for which the consequence is God's visitation in jealous wrath. But rather than accuse Aaron directly, Moses generously gives him the opportunity to explain, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" What can the people have possibly done to you that you have put their lives in such jeopardy? Similarly, in the garden God gave both Adam and Eve the

opportunity to confess: Where are you? Who told you? What have you done? Like Adam and Eve, Aaron doesn't confess and admit responsibility. "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot." Just as Moses calmed God down, so now Aaron tries to calm Moses down. But he doesn't have the same arguments at his disposal as did Moses who reminded God of what he had set out to do and urged him to be faithful to those purposes.

Aaron refuses to take any responsibility for what has happened, the evidence of which is so clear to Moses's eyes and ears. The only argument at his disposal is to pass on the blame, just like Adam and Eve. Aaron throws Israel under the bus: "You know the people, that they are set on evil." Yes, Moses knows the people only too well. He has been on the receiving end of their constant grumbling and complaining ever since they left Egypt. He would agree with God's assessment of them as a stiff-necked people. But Moses looks on this people very differently than does Aaron. This is the people he has agreed to represent before God, and to whom he represents God. He is the mediator in this grand experiment of a holy God and his sinful people attempting to live together in covenant relationship. Aaron refuses to identify with the people. He has no solidarity with them, no compassion for them. They are simply "the people." By contrast, not only did Moses express solidarity with and compassion for his people, he implored God to do the same. "They're *your* people," he had reminded God. "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against *your* people."

Aaron fails to treat the situation as serious. "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot," he said to Moses. Let's not get too worked up over this. Is this really that serious? Presumably Aaron didn't see this as a great sin. He didn't take seriously God's warnings of his jealous wrath. He had simply given the people what they requested. Aaron faithfully repeats to Moses the people's words to him. There's no indication that resisting the people might have been a suitable choice for him as the one Moses left in his place as leader, that he could have led the people away from putting themselves in jeopardy of God's jealous wrath.

Finally Aaron blames his tools: "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." This, of course, is ludicrous to us readers, for we have been told that Aaron "fashioned [the gold] with a graving tool and made a golden calf" (32:4). We also know that it was Aaron who built the altar and proclaimed the festival that the people are celebrating with their partying, their singing and dancing. But none of this does he confess to Moses.

Aaron fails in leadership on so many levels. Yet this is the person the Lord had told Moses to consecrate as high priest to act on behalf of the people. How can Aaron be the high priest if he doesn't identify with the people whom he represents? Moses later says that "the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him" (Deut 9:20).

What a contrast between Aaron and Moses:

Aaron saw the people 'bent on evil'; Moses defended them before God's hot anger (v. 11). Aaron exonerated himself from all active involvement; Moses put his own life on the line for Israel's sake. Aaron was too weak to restrain the people; Moses was strong enough to restrain even God.¹

Aaron tried to avoid his guilt by denying responsibility and blaming the people and his tools. But all he does is intensify his guilt. Moses doesn't bother to reply to him.

The Levites' Zeal (32:25-29)

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day." (32:25-29)

Moses saw that the people had broken loose; this is the same verb used of the priest loosening the hair of the suspected adulteress (Num 5), yet another indication that this passage is about adultery, about breaking covenant with God by serving and bowing down to man-made images of created things. Aaron had lost control. One could say he abdicated control at the very beginning, when the people first gathered against him, when he refused to correct them. The people are running wild. They are so wild "that they were a menace to any who might oppose them" (JPS). No one could stand in their way. But this is what Moses does; he acts swiftly and decisively to restore order.

Stationing himself at the entrance to the camp, Moses said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." He challenged the people to make a choice. To whom was their allegiance? Even if they had transferred their allegiance to the golden calf there was now the opportunity to repent and turn back to the Lord. All the Levite men rallied to him—his own tribe. Moses prefaced his instructions to the Levites with the solemn prophetic preamble, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel." At his instruction they passed through the camp and struck down 3000 men with the sword. This raises troubling questions about religion and violence. Desperate times called for desperate measures. Through this slaughter the Levites restored order to a camp that was out of control. They acted on behalf of the Lord's jealousy, his passion for his honor. The word "jealousy" can also be translated "zeal," which perhaps makes it a little easier to understand. Who is on the Lord's side? The Levites were zealous for God and acted in zeal to restore his honor. As well as restoring order to the camp, this gruesome slaughter was their ordination into the service of the Lord. This ordination into the Lord's service was the bestowal of a blessing from the Lord. In turn the Levites were to bestow a blessing on the people, the priestly benediction with which I am ending each service this month.

Moses has already interceded once for his people. Having restored order in the camp, he announces he will return to God to make a second intercession.

Moses's intercession (32:30-35)

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned

against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made. (32:30-35)

Here again we see Moses's leadership in contrast to Aaron's lack thereof. Moses is under no illusions about the people's guilt: they have sinned a great sin. They are guilty of spiritual adultery. They have aroused the Lord's jealousy, for he is a jealous God. In the second commandment he would visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him.

Moses has won a reprieve for the people as a whole: God changed his mind about finishing off the whole people. But 3000 have just been killed. Now Moses dares to go further: "perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." How can he make atonement for the people? The instructions for the tabernacle had included the mercy seat or atonement cover and the bronze altar. But with the tablets shattered and the covenant broken, can the tabernacle be built? There is no atonement system and it looks doubtful if there will be one. Furthermore sinning this great sin is beyond atonement. This is deliberate, intentional sin of the worst kind. This infidelity arouses the Lord's jealousy and provokes him to anger.

Moses went back up the mountain to the Lord. He confessed the people's sin: "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin." The people are without excuse and without options. Moses can offer no apology for them. Instead, he makes another daring request: "if you will forgive their sin." And if not? If God will not forgive the people's sin, Moses asks to be blotted out of the Lord's book. Moses is either saying that he will go down with the sinking ship or he is offering himself in the place of the people: take me instead; blot me out of your book so that they remain in the book. Either way, he shows how thoroughly he identifies with the people he leads and for whom he intercedes. He's willing to lay down his life either with them or for them.

The Lord refuses his request. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." Moses has not sinned, so he cannot be blotted out of the book. But everyone else has sinned. So what hope is there?

God tells Moses to lead the people onward from Sinai to the place of which he has spoken, to the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will send an angel, a heavenly messenger, ahead of Moses and the people. But the implication is that God himself will not come along. They will journey on with his Absence not his Presence. They will journey on without the tabernacle. Nevertheless, he will visit, but this will not be a pleasant visit. His visit will be to visit the people's sin upon them, as he had warned in the second commandment. His jealousy has been aroused and his wrath provoked. The chapter closes with the Lord sending a plague on the people, an immediate fulfillment of his warning that he would visit the people's sin upon them.

The Women's Bible Studies have been in 1 Corinthians 10 this past week. This is very timely for there are numerous parallels with Exodus 32. Paul cites several episodes from Israel's wilderness wanderings, including the golden calf incident. "Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play'" (1 Cor 10:7, quoting Exod 32:6).

Paul likens the Christian life to a race (9:24-27). Many may start a race but not all make it across the finish line. All the Israelites crossed the Red Sea to begin the passage through the wilderness. They all entered the race. But not all made it to the finish line, crossing the Jordan to enter the land of promise. Indeed, of the adults aged 20 and above, only two made it to the finish line: Joshua and Caleb. All the others fell along the way, and their bodies were strewn through the wilderness: “with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (10:5). Looking back on Israel’s history, Paul sees the wilderness strewn with thousands of dead bodies of those who had begun the race but fallen along the way and failed to finish. He writes, “these things took place as examples for us... these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (10:6, 11).

The particular issue in Corinth was participation in meals in idol temples. The “strong,” because of their superior knowledge that the idols were not really gods, felt at liberty to participate in meals in temples in the presence of the idols. But they were causing the brethren with weaker consciences to stumble. They were also putting themselves in jeopardy. “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?” (10:22). How? By eating and drinking at demons’ table in the temple one day, and eating and drinking at the Lord’s table in the church the next day. This indicates divided loyalty, mixed affections. These who claim to be strong are unaware of how their affections are being diverted by this participation at two tables. Paul, as a good leader like Moses and unlike Aaron, takes this seriously and warns the Corinthians: “flee from idolatry” (10:14). Later he writes, “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2).

So often we think of coming to faith in Christ as the finish line; we have our ticket to heaven and the journey is secure. But coming to Christ is the start line. It’s entrance into the journey in which we begin the process of learning to give all our affections to the Lord, giving our undivided loyalty to him, with eyes for no other. This is not easy, because as we go through each week we encounter things and people that attract us, that seduce us to give our affections to things of our own creation. Our affections for the Lord diminish.

This is why it is so important that we meet on a Sunday morning. We gather to remind ourselves of who God is, what he has done for us in Christ, and what he is doing in us through his Spirit. We remind ourselves of which race we’re in, and we reset our eyes on the finish line. We leave with a renewed resolve to persevere in this race so that we cross the finish lines with our hearts wholly devoted to the Lord.

And when we do sin, when our affections are drawn away? We need a mediator, one who will intercede for us. Moses said that perhaps he could make atonement. He was unable to do so. The OT priesthood was weak: “Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood... the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests” (Heb 7:11, 28). Men like Aaron. But we now have a perfect high priest who has entered into God’s very presence there to appear on our behalf. He pleads our case before God. God hears, and he forgives. And he pours out his Spirit on us to intensify our affections for him and to enable us to persevere in this race towards the finish line.

God has “won my affection and bound my soul fast.”² We belong to Christ: “my love he owns, I have no longings for another, I’m satisfied in him alone.”³

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 570.

2. John Stocker, *Thy Mercy My God* (1776).

3. Steve and Vikki Cook, *I Will Glory in My Redeemer* (2000).