

God Came for Messed Up People

Exodus 32:7-14 (NIV)

⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' ⁹ "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." ¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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 it will be their inheritance forever.' " ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

The mountain was covered in smoke. Lightning flashed. Thunder shook the earth. A voice spoke from Mount Sinai: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2) "You shall have no other gods nor shall you make any idol that you worship or bow down to." The rest of the Ten Commandments follow. The Israelites are left trembling, begging Moses to be the one to speak to God. They say, "If we speak to him, we will die." They understood their unworthiness. Moses goes up. He talks with God. He comes back down and shares their conversation with the people. Later, at the LORD's invitation, he goes back up. He walks into the thick darkness on top of the mountain, into what looks like a consuming fire.

A few days go by, and Moses does not return. A week passes. Two weeks. Three. The murmurs grow louder. The voices stop asking, "Where is he?" and instead say, "He's never coming back." The people, the leaders, gather around Aaron, whom Moses left in charge. "Moses is gone." "Make us gods who will go before us." (Exodus 32:1) The people take off their gold earrings and give them to Aaron. He fashions a golden god in the shape of a calf. "This is our god!" They say. "This is the one who brought us up out of Egypt," even though they still see the mountain and the smoke where the LORD spoken "You shall have no other gods nor shall you make any idol that you worship or bow down to." There's a festival. Adultery. Fornication. No restrictions. No restraints. Unbridled sin. These are supposed to be God's special, set apart, holy people. That's messed up.

Enter our first Bible reading: Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (verses 7-10)

In less than 40 days of receiving the Ten Commandments from God himself, the Israelites willfully, knowingly break and disregard them. They're acting like unbelievers. That would be like us going from worshiping here today the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – to in a month and a half worshiping this stuffed animal as God, saying that this thing saved us, this thing rescued us from a life of slavery. Those Israelites, they're messed up.

How about us? Can we claim to be better than these messed up Israelites? We may not have a golden calf here that we are claiming delivered us from the bondage of slavery, but we have idols. An idol is not just some image or statue used in a religion. An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our lives or anything that comes before him. What's your idol? What takes top priority in your life? Is it your job that you pour hours upon hours into, neglecting your family, making your worship life sporadic? Is it your family, that instead of leading my family in serving the Lord and in growing in the knowledge and love of our Savior, I choose to be away from God, that if I have to make a choice between God and family, I chose family? Do you sacrifice your time and your talents in pursuing that "A," that GPA, that degree that will supposedly set you up for life, that this is the most important thing to you? Is it recreation, that if I have to choose between spending time with God or going camping, sleeping in, playing videos, skiing, that this is what I pick over God? With all our idols, do we ever think that we are as messed up as those Israelites?

Is there anything that the LORD said about those messed up Israelites that does not apply to us? Have we not been quick to turn away from God? Have we never made an idol out of self, work, family, recreation, or anything else? Have we never sacrificed to

something or someone else other than the one and only God? Have we never given credit to what we have in life to someone or something other than God? Have we never been stiff-necked, that we have never resisted correction from God, that we have never stubbornly asserted ourselves as the leaders in place of God?

We are messed up, just as messed up as these Israelites worshiping a golden calf. We deserve to have LORD's anger burn against us. We don't deserve to be called God's people just as they didn't. We deserve to be destroyed by the LORD. So, why don't we get what we deserve as messed up people? Why didn't the Israelites? It's because of an intercession.

"But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God." (verse 11a) Moses resisted the appeal of being the new face of God's people being made into a great nation. Instead, he appealed to God's character, his reputation, the promises he had made. "God, these are your people. You have shown them love and mercy. You delivered them from slavery, and you promised to deliver all of us from the slavery of sin. That's who you are. If you destroy your people, what will the Egyptians think? You just showed them through the 10 plagues that ravaged Egypt that you are the only God, that their gods are mute, useless, fake. You showed yourself to them as the Mighty Deliverer. If you destroy the Israelites, the Egyptians will think you brought them out for the purpose of destroying them, not saving them. You will be remembered as a cruel, petty, and vengeful God who uses his power to punish. Remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, messed up people you chose in spite of their flaws and their sins to bring about the Savior of all nations. All three of them were liars, sinners. They didn't deserve your promises. But hold to your Word because you always have. You never break a promise."

Moses interceded, and the LORD relented. The LORD relented not because Moses was so persuasive, and not because the people deserved a second chance. He did not relent because Moses was holy. Moses was flawed - a murderer, a deserter. He was messed up. The LORD relented because he himself is merciful, as Moses reminded him. God treats us not as we deserve to be treated. He made a promise to bring a male offspring from Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to save the world, a greater intercessor than Moses.

The promised offspring, Jesus, was not messed up like us. He was and is perfect. Yet he suffered God's righteous anger on account of our sins. He paid the price and lived the perfection neither the Israelites nor we could live. On the basis of his perfect life, a life of keeping all ten of the Commandments for every moment of his whole life on earth, he intercedes for messed up people like us. In fact, he lives to intercede not for the holy, not for the sinless, not for the perfect people with their lives all put together. God came for messed up people like us. He came for the sinners, the outcasts, the worst of the worst. The Pharisees and teachers of the law balked at Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. God sought out the blasphemer and persecutor and violent man Paul and made him his apostle. God sought out the murderer Moses and appointed him to lead his people out of Egypt. God has come for messed up people like us. As Paul wrote in our second Bible reading: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (1 Timothy 1:15) Yeah, we are that messed up. This world is full of messed up people. Yet God came specifically for them, for us, to save us all.

Knowing how Moses, a messed up man, interceded for the messed up Israelites, we have the opportunity to intercede for so many other messed up people. We can intercede for ourselves because we are idol worshipers. We can pray that the Lord would cleanse us, correct us, and soften our stiff-necked stubbornness, to help us keep God as the first love in our lives. We can intercede for the messed up people around us, the people whom we call brothers and sisters in Christ who are just as messed up and sinful as we are. We intercede for them not that God would be okay with their sinfulness, but that he would have mercy on them because he came to save them and lead them to repentance and so live a life to honor God's reputation. We pray for all those messed up people of the world – for those who commit atrocities, murder, genocide, rape, pedophilia, blasphemy, and any other awful thing we can think of. We intercede for those in positions of power, those in government, those who use their power to cover up the truth and promote their own selfish agendas. We intercede for them that God that he would increase their time of grace on this earth so that they would know and believe in the Intercessor who came to save messed up people. In all our intercessions, we intercede best when we come back to the basis of who God is and what he has done to save us – his grace, his mercy, his patience.

God came for messed up people, messed up people like us. Lord Jesus, intercede for us. Have mercy on us according to your unfailing love. Deal with us as your perfection covers over us. Keep us your people. Relent and do not bring disaster on us. Save us as our Intercessor, the God who came for messed up people like us. Amen.