

## Sermon 109, The Mediator v. Idolatry, Exodus 32:15-24

**Proposition:** The narrator wants us to see that the mediator not only intercedes with God, but also that the mediator confronts and stops idolatry in the people under his charge.

- I. God's Law v. Israel's Idolatry, vv. 15-19
  - A. Journey Down the Mountain, vv. 15-18
    1. The Two Tables of the Law, vv. 15-16
    2. Idolatrous Singing in the Camp, vv. 17-18
  - B. Arrival in the Camp, vv. 19
    1. The Idol and Dancing, v. 19a
    2. The Mediator Breaks the Tables of the Law, v. 19b
- II. God's Mediator v. Israel's Idolatry, v. 20
  - A. The Mediator Destroys the Idol
  - B. The Mediator Punishes the Israelites
- III. God's Mediator v. Israel's Corrupt Leader, vv. 21-24
  - A. Aaron Led Israel to Sin
  - B. You Can Lead Others to Sin
  - C. The Mediator Confronts Aaron
  - D. The Mediator Intercedes for Aaron, Deut. 9:20

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, last week we saw one side of the Mediator's work. We saw Moses interceding with God for the continued existence of Israel. That is a truly glorious part of what our Mediator does for us. But it is far from the whole of the Mediator's work. We like the idea that Jesus asks God to forgive our sins. It makes our sins seem more manageable, less offensive. Jesus almost seems to be someone who's OK with sin when we focus too exclusively on that side of His mediatorial work. And so I want you to look with me this evening at the other half of what the Mediator does. As you'll see, the Mediator stops idolatry, destroys idols, and confronts corrupt leaders who enable idolatry.

#### **I. God's Law v. Israel's Idolatry, vv. 15-19**

We can break our text this evening into three distinct sections. In all three, we see a conflict. The first section begins and ends with references to the tables of the law. The law stands against Israel's sin, which is sandwiched in the middle between descriptions of the tablets. The second two sections describe how the Mediator stands against sin, both the sin of the group and the sin of a corrupt leader. We will look at each of these in their turn. Thus, we turn first to the narrator's description of the tablets, and the idolatry that is surrounded by references to the tablets.

##### **A. Journey Down the Mountain, vv. 15-18**

Moses goes up and down Sinai many times. He is a very impressive mountain climber. But I believe this is the only time that the narrator lingers over the trip and describes some aspect of it.

We don't get a wide shot of Moses picking his way down the mountain. But we do get a tight shot of the two tables of the law.

### **1. The Two Tables of the Law, vv. 15-16**

In fact, they are described in two luxurious verses. What should immediately jump out at you is just how important these tablets are. They are the tablets of the testimony. That is, they go with the ark of the covenant, also called the ark of the testimony. They are the constitution of the commonwealth of Israel. If you will indeed obey God's voice, as written literally in stone on these tablets, you will be His treasured possession above all families of the earth; and if you won't, these laws will rise up and tear you limb from limb. The letter kills, and these laws have the power of destruction in every groove of every letter.

The narrator repeats two things about the tablets. First, he says twice that they were written on both sides. Second, he says that God had made them and written on them.

In other words, aside from being the constitution of Israel, these aren't run-of-the-mill tablets. These are museum pieces. These belong under glass in a climate-controlled room with eighth security cameras and four armed guards. They need to be hidden like the crown jewels of England. They need to be treated with the utmost respect. There are no other artifacts in existence that are literally written with the finger of God. A motorcycle ridden by Elvis, a letter written by George Washington, a fresco painted by Michelangelo — these things are valuable. But something written by God, that only exists in a single copy? There is nothing of comparable value in the entire world. And that, of course, is the point. God made the covenant with Israel, and then carved it into stone to symbolize its enduring permanence. Obviously, you don't have to have a PhD in Lit to see what's coming. The reason the narrator is making a big deal out of these tablets is because something really bad is about to happen to them.

### **2. Idolatrous Singing in the Camp, vv. 17-18**

The reader, of course, already knows what's going on in the camp. Moses does too, because God has told him all about it. Fascinatingly, of course, Moses does not fill Joshua in. Instead, he comments only on what his ears tell him: "I hear singing that doesn't sound like the singing of victory or defeat." In other words, "Yes, there is a noise in the camp, but it's not like any battle sound I've ever heard." Some commentators have surmised that Joshua was a little bit martial in his thinking and background, and that with him just about any noise could sound like warfare. That may be, though that also may be more than the narrator is trying to tell us. This anecdote is not here to build Joshua's character, but to foreshadow the terrible discovery that Moses and Joshua are about to make. The singing is a sign that all is not well down at the foot of Sinai.

### **B. Arrival in the Camp, vv. 19**

And indeed, as the two mountaineers crest the hill and see the awful truth, they are appalled.

#### **1. The Idol and Dancing, v. 19a**

There, in the sight of the sun, gleams the golden calf. There is Israel, celebrating before it in a National Lampoon parody of a *Star Wars* festival. And Moses' anger burned. He saw in a single glance that the Lord had not exaggerated the situation in the slightest.

It's one thing to hear about sin. We hear about sin every day, thanks to the news. But to see it, in person — that is a step farther, and that is a step that Moses does not appreciate in the slightest.

## **2. The Mediator Breaks the Tables of the Law, v. 19b**

Obviously, in a move that you knew was coming, Moses' next step is to take these museum-quality artifacts, items that would stand out in the British Museum and Egypt's National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, not to mention any less-richly-endowed collection, and smash them. He shattered them at the foot of the mountain. Why? Because the law cannot stop sin. It can and will destroy sinners. But it is powerless to reform them. Moses could not carry the two tables of the law into the camp and say, "Come on! It says right here, written in stone, that we are not allowed to do this!" The Mediator stands against sin. But his first action against it is merely symbolic, to smash the tables that record God's covenant with Israel. The writing of God? Oh well. It could not stop Israel from worshiping the calf.

### **II. God's Mediator v. Israel's Idolatry, v. 20**

But though the law, so lovingly described, cannot make the sin stop, the Mediator can. And he does. I said a few moments ago that when we focus only on how the Mediator pleads for forgiveness for Israel, we forget just how bad sin is. But the chapter does not present that one-sided impression.

#### **A. The Mediator Destroys the Idol**

The Mediator's second action, after announcing symbolically that the covenant is destroyed and God's promises are all withdrawn because of Israel's sin, is to take the calf and burn it, grind it, and throw it into the single stream that descended from Sinai. That stream was the only source of water in the camp. And thus, to throw the calf into it was to make Israel drink it.

#### **B. The Mediator Punishes the Israelites**

The Mediator makes Israel suffer the preliminary consequences of their sin. No one in here wants to drink powdered gold, or eat ashes. Yuck. What exactly was the point of this? And how did Moses burn a metal idol, and then turn it into powder? We don't know for sure. He may have been skilled in metallurgy. Possibly the idol had a wooden body with thin gold plating on its outside. Thus, ordinary fire would melt through the gold and burn the wooden body, yielding large ashes that could be ground up and thrown into the water. Regardless of what exactly the process was, the outcome was gross. It seems that Moses' message was "Eat your sin!" That is, live with the consequences of your rebellion. When you decide to engage in false worship, be aware that you're going to have to eat it later.

Allow me to quote an American proverb: "You've made your bed. Now lie in it." Similarly, Solomon writes "A perverse man will be filled with the fruit of his ways, and a good man with the fruit of his deeds" (Pro 14:14 RSV). What you do will influence what you get. Scratch that. What you do will *determine* what you get.

The Mediator does not merely intercede with God to take away Israel's sin. He also makes Israel suffer the consequences of their sin. This first punishment is just a little gross, but

not harmful to life and limb. The second punishment, one we'll look at next week, actually kills three thousand Israelites.

This is the Mediator's work. He represents the people's needs to God, including by asking for forgiveness. But he also represents God's justice to the people, including by forcing them to drink their idol's carcass and sending the Levites through the camp to kill.

### **III. God's Mediator v. Israel's Corrupt Leader, vv. 21-24**

The Mediator also stands against Israel's corrupt leader. Just as Zechariah, speaking by the Spirit, says that in a single month he fired three worthless shepherds who were pretending to care for the flock of God, so Moses here deals with a corrupt shepherd who hurt the flock and led them into idolatry.

#### **A. Aaron Led Israel to Sin**

You see, that's what the text says. Moses that Aaron brought sin upon Israel. Aaron, meanwhile, says that the people were bent on sin and implies that there was basically nothing he could do to stop them.

Parents, admit it. You have followed this same route in your own life. You have let the children fall into sin, and then tried to blame them for your leadership failure. Fellow pastors, elders, we can do the same in the church. We can refuse to exercise authority and thereby drive our people into sin, then blame them when they go off the rails.

#### **B. You Can Lead Others to Sin**

One of the scariest messages of this chapter is that you can lead others to sin. You can bring sin on the people under your charge. And when you do, the Mediator's first job is not to go to God and ask Him to let you off the hook. The Mediator's first job is to rebuke you.

#### **C. The Mediator Confronts Aaron**

That's what Moses did. He confronted Aaron. He asked him point-blank if he was getting revenge on the people by leading them into the evil of crafting the golden calf.

#### **D. The Mediator Intercedes for Aaron, Deut. 9:20**

Only then did he intercede for Aaron. Both are true. "And the LORD was very angry with Aaron and would have destroyed him; so I prayed for Aaron also at the same time" (Deu 9:20). God was angry enough to destroy Aaron.

I still remember a conversation with my boss back when I was working construction between high school and college. "I was angry enough to quit," I told him.

"I was angry enough to fire you," he responded.

That was a tough conversation. But he didn't fire me, he worked with me, and I learned a lot from him.

Well, the Mediator stood against sin. Aaron never did this again. He learned his lesson.

The law could not stop sin — but the Mediator could, and did. He crushed the golden calf. He turned Aaron away from his ungodliness. He rebuked the people and their leader, and brought them back to the right way — and then he interceded for them with God and brought them forgiveness.

Oh, brothers and sisters, worship the Mediator — and fear Him too. His anger is but for a moment, but His favor is life. Amen.