Moses pleads for his people

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Preacher: Principal John L. Mackay

[0:00] As we turn to look at some aspects of the message in the chapter we read, Exodus 32, it's perhaps useful to center our thoughts around verses 10 and 11.

In verse 10, the Lord says to Moses, Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.
But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people? As we consider this scene at Sinai, we've got brought before us a very vivid presentation of the human predicament.
There was Moses on the mountaintop. Within the cloud, the glory cloud of the Lord's presence, enjoying fellowship with the Lord.
Down below, the people in their impatience, in their obtuseness, doing violence to the requirements of that very same God.
[1:19] Instead of worshipping him, they were creating for themselves a golden calf. But in this chapter, we don't just have a portrayal of how great a hold sin has on the human heart.

We've also got a very clear presentation of what it takes to rectify that situation, of what it takes to reverse the impact of sin on human heart, on human lives.
Because in Moses we have a mediatorial figure, who foreshadows the great mediator to come. And in Moses' attitude and Moses' action, we can see much that is eventually fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ.
So first of all, I want to look a little at the tragic situation caused by the people's rebellion.
The tragedy of rebellion. If you look at commentators, you'll find that they're very much exercised over the question, precisely which commandment are the people breaking in this incident?
[2:46] Was it the first commandment? To have no other gods? Or was it just the second commandment that they broke? Not to make a carved image or a likeness of any created being as a representation of God.

Certainly they broke the second commandment. There was the golden calf. It was very clear evidence. But people differ in their views as to what was going on.
And it may be that that actually reflects the original situation. That there was an element of confusion in what was going on. But it won't really do justice to all the evidence of scripture.
To say that they were just creating this golden calf as a means of worshipping the one true God.
Because God himself levels the charge against them.
In verse 8. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it. Not to me through it, but to it, the calf itself. And later on in verse 31, Moses himself admits as much.
[3:54] They have made for themselves gods of gold. But what we have here is a presentation of the fact that sins rarely come singly.

Sins very rarely arise on their own because they come out of a heart attitude where a heart is alienated, separated from God.
And when that separation occurs, it can't be contained just within one aspect of life. It's a plague that spreads, that infects, that causes widespread corruption and ruin.
And here we have a presentation of what happens when no matter which commandment they're breaking, it takes the heart, it grips the attention, the motives, the action of a nation and poisons every aspect of its spiritual relationship with God.
The fundamental question in human life is who or what is going to have number one place in my life.
[5:19] There's no option about this. It's a reflection of the way we're created. It's a reflection of what human nature actually is. That we look, that we organise our lives in such a way that there is

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something that drives us, that there is some focus to our living, that there is something that dominates our hearts.

That's part of the way we have been created. And of course, the goal that ought to dominate our living is that of having a right relationship with the one true and living God.
But while fallen mankind are instinctively religious beings, are instinctively looking for something to take control and shape their lives, we naturally now substitute anything and everything in place of the one true God as the focus of our living.
Some blatantly substitute themselves, live lives that are devoted to self-satisfaction, live lives of selfishness and greed.
again, there are those who seem far more altruistic. Rather than focusing on self, they focus on others. There are those who make their families the focus of their living.
[6:44] There are those who make a charitable cause the focus of their living. And in and of themselves, those things are not necessarily wrong. But they are wrong if they take first place.

They are wrong if they dominate and blot out what really ought to be there at the heart of our living. What we are concerned with in looking at ourselves is to ask the question what is it that is the number one controlling influence in my life to what do I give first place and everything else has to fall into place after it.
And we're not to look back at these Israelites and say of them how primitive how gross a calf a golden calf and say that this is your God.
A golden calf doesn't have to have four legs and gold plate pinned on over a wooden frame. Whenever our lives are dominated by something or someone other than God then there's our idol there's our golden calf and as we look at ourselves tonight we have to ask the question what is number one place what has number one place in my life what is it that takes over and says everything else is secondary and as we look at this situation and we try to answer that question for ourselves there are two particular aspects I'd like to point out yet once more to you because they constitute solemn warnings and the first is the fact that this behavior here is displayed by those who have experienced the salvation of the Lord it's not in the pagan darkness of Egypt that they made the golden calf perhaps there would have been some excuse for them had that been the case but this is the people who have experienced the Lord's arms stretched out to deliver them the Lord's power to grasp them out of the oppression of
Egypt this is the people who have experienced the Lord's power splitting the sea so that they could pass through unscathed and destroying the Israelites these are the people who have experienced many tokens of the Lord's favor during their travels in the wilderness even in the brief period of time from Egypt from the Red Sea to Sinai and above all these are the people who 40 days earlier had uttered the words of commitment all that the Lord has spoken we will do they had experienced the Lord's salvation they had known the Lord's goodness they had spoken and committed themselves to obedience and here they are with a golden calf we are reminded of the solemn truth that being brought to the other sides by the power of the
[10:23] Lord making solemn profession of commitment to him none of these privileges none of these pledges inoculates us against falling into sin into gross sin let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he falls here is Israel forgetful that was the problem they had forgotten what the Lord had done they focused on what they could see on this Moses this man who has brought us out of Egypt and no mention of the Lord their God they said we don't know what's happened to Moses he's up on this mountaintop he's been gone for over a month we must do something for ourselves and they didn't think to turn around as it were and look up at the mountain and see there the theophanic presence the clouds and the fire that was showing the presence of the Lord they blotted that out from their memory they wouldn't look at it they just kept their eyes down forgot the past and the Lord's goodness and propelled into gross sin there is a solemn warning here for each one of us to take heed to ourselves and there's something more this breach of the covenant was not just a matter of the ignorance or the perversity of the ordinary

Israelites it was acquiesced in by their religious leadership Aaron took an active if somewhat mixed up role in facilitating what went wrong he's a very sorry figure when he has to say by way of excuse they gave me the gold and I chucked it in the fire and out came a calf never touched it didn't have anything to do with me I'm innocent not mean but he was the one who directed an altar perhaps he was trying to turn the situation around and when he said tomorrow will be a feast to the Lord perhaps he was trying to bring them back from the verge but they weren't listening he was a

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religious leader that refused to say no when the people were going astray and in refusing to say no he failed miserably in the task that was his it's not enough for us to be able to say of any man of any leader in a church or whoever that's the way they're going that's what they're doing human leadership can fail and frequently does the test is is what we're doing and where we're going and how we're behaving in accordance with what the
Lord wills here we have a reminder to trust not in princes or human beings of any sort but constantly to test where we are how we're living and where we're going by the invariable standard of the word of the Lord so we have this tragic situation the people's rebellion rebellion against light against goodness against the commitment that they'd given a rebellion if not fostered but certainly not stopped by the religious leaders of the people by Aaron a tragic situation and alas not one that's confined to the pages of history and over against the people's sin we have the reality of the Lord's wrath he speaks of his wrath burning hot and consuming them he looks at the people and dissociates himself from them he talks to Moses of your people this people he'll no longer recognize them as my people the relationship has become fraught it's on the point of breaking down and we have here a presentation of the reality of the wrath of God now that's not something that we ordinarily want to think about the wrath of God the anger of God the fury the indignation of God scripture uses a great many terms to describe it and does so often but we realize that it is a threat to us it is a threat because of our sin but if we're ever to understand the message of the
Bible we have to grasp the reality that does exist of the wrath of God it is real and it remains very relevant because sin remains for some people many theologians nowadays who try to dismiss the wrath of God they say it's just a figure of speech a way of speaking it's a metaphor it doesn't really correspond to any ultimate reality but far from it oh there's a problem there's a problem because our experience of anger is of human anger and so often human anger is capricious it's cruel it's not based on reality but on a warped perception of reality so often human anger and human wrath is unjustified but God isn't arbitrary he's not an unreasonable tyrant his anger is not something that is swayed by the passion of the moment it is a real response on the part of
God because he is the one who asserts who has to assert his right to have his way in the world that he has created he is the one who has as the sovereign lord the right to determine the behavior that is going to be tolerated in this world because he didn't just create it in the past he rules over it now and what is contrary to his way is a challenge to his power and he reacts against that challenge and in many ways the reality of God's wrath is a source of encouragement because we can often look at this world and think everything's out of order we can often look at this world and it seems to be lacking in rhyme or reason God's anger the reality of divine wrath is a sign that the universe is not ultimately irrational but it's moral it's guided it's accountable and God will require an accounting [18:20] God's anger is a sign that he cares about the human situation not just in the broad terms not just in general but in particular as well he refuses to dismiss humanity whom he's created in his own image he refuses to dismiss us as insignificant microbes in a vast universe we're made in his image created to achieve his purposes and divine wrath against sin is an inescapable feature of his response to our rebellion God is a righteous judge and God reacts with indignation every day here the people had corrupted themselves ruined the modern phrase would be no longer fit for purpose there was Israel selected specially by God saved by

God called his chosen people his peculiar treasure the people he'd reserved to himself and as he looks down on them he says they're no longer fit for purpose the nation that had been so privileged God reacts against with divine indignation because they had spurned and made light of the honor that he had accorded them but we've also to recognize not only the reality of divine wrath but also the fact that divine wrath is not of the essence of God in the same way as his love or his holiness are God's wrath is the response of his holiness to the sin of a rebellious creation without sin there would be no wrath the situation isn't parallel to God's love
God's love existed and was active before ever there was a creation the triune God Father Son and Holy Spirit were in eternal relationship of love before ever there was a creation love is of the essence of God God's holiness God's goodness they exist apart from the creation and prior to the fall and that's why scripture says God is love in a way in which it never says God is wrath that's why scripture says that the imposition of judgment is strange and alien to God it's one of the vital aspects of the self-revelation that he'll give to Moses in another chapter or so that God says he is slow to anger it is something that is not at the same fundamental level as God's love

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God's holiness not saying it's less real it's not less real because it's a reaction to sin but if Adam had never fallen there would be no display of divine wrath God's wrath is the reaction of his holiness to human sin and more fundamental is the fact that God longs to be gracious and is eager to show compassion not compromise on his truth not give over on his justice but there is a priority to his love and in fact we can see something of that in this very passage the way in which love and wrath coexist in God the way in which grace and anger can combine mercy and indignation being shown at the same time you see we have to use words we have to use words to think about God and when we do that we can only think about one aspect of the divine being at a time but it's not that these aspects are separate

God is one harmonious whole he is not divided the problem is our perception we're finite we can't take them all in we can't understand all that's there we've got to use words and look at one thing and then at another but he is one he coheres he is harmonious and we're never to think that these things exist in isolation they can never be separated from the divine being and here in this incident God says to Moses let me alone leave me let me be at rest let me be at peace let me be settled there's a lot in that statement he's saying to Moses you have the capacity to to unsettle me he's saying to Moses if you do nothing the result will be the outpouring of divine wrath and I'll raise up a new nation descended from you there's a thought there's a prospect there's something that would be attractive to the ambition of this world there'll be a great nation raised up from you but what [24:07] God is presenting is a hypothetical proposal that hinges on Moses leaving God alone and what is in fact happening is that God is testing Moses testing Moses to see if he will react as a covenant leader should if you don't leave me alone Moses then this is what's going to happen you'll be the start of a new nation but if you put first the people you represent then other possibilities open up at the very moment that God here expresses his wrath he opens the door a little to this prospect of Moses acting as covenant mediator in such a way that the wrath will be stemmed this is God showing how grace can operate even in a situation in which his wrath is imminently justified and so we have Moses acting as covenant mediator he'd done it before when the

Israelites were menaced by the Egyptians at the Red Sea Moses cried out to the Lord on their behalf when they reached the waters of Marah and they were bitter he pled with God for them he was the one who when they were fighting the Amalekites was on the mountaintops with his hands raised while the battle was going on below now there's a far more serious crisis Moses is being tested how will the mediator between the Lord and Israel react will he intervene with God on behalf of the people and that's just what he does the man who refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter isn't diverted by the prospect of becoming the progenitor of a great nation rather he is there pleading with God for the people whose covenant head he is the people for whom he is the mediator before God he's there in the middle between God and the people and he's pleading with God now if you read these words that Moses uses at one level they seem the daftest question that's ever been asked why does your wrath burn hot against your people there was the golden calf they were running amok they'd thrown off the traces

Moses Aaron had let them to the confusion their confusion before their enemies he had let them behave in this loose fashion why does your anger wrath burn hot against your people it's patently obvious but that's not what Moses is saying that's to misunderstand the situation the stress is on your wrath and notice how Moses turns it again he refuses to call them my people or even this people he puts it back into the relationship they're in with the Lord your people what is Moses here doing he is here emphasizing the reality of who God is he's not saying these people deserve to be forgiven he's not saying as so many theologians would say they're basically all right it's a momentary aberration

God can overlook this Moses as mediator is pleading on the basis of grace he's pleading on the basis of who God is he's pleading on the basis of what God's purposes are he's saying these are your people to whom you've already extended salvation that they didn't deserve and asking that God continue to deal with them in that way he mentions other things as well he says think how the adversary will how the Egyptians will vaunt themselves the people have been led off into the wilderness and have died there Moses pleads the reality of the covenant commitment the Lord had given oh the people have fallen short of their commitment but hadn't the Lord entered into promises remember Abraham Isaac and we would say Abraham Isaac and Jacob but Moses changes it Abraham Isaac and Israel the new name the name of the saved man the name of the one who is the prince with God he is pleading with the almighty the reality of the covenant the grace that the

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Lord has already extended he's saying your people whom you brought out those descended from the forefathers to whom you graciously gave commitment this is the people that were divinely constituted my firstborn son and family relationships can't be negated by sin so here we have Moses acting as the Lord intended him to the Lord gave him the opportunity the Lord encouraged him he was in effect saying to Moses be a covenant mediator and Moses pled as a covenant mediator not on the grounds of the worthiness of the people but on the grounds of the reality and commitment of

[29:57] God and the Lord relented and did not bring in the people the disaster he threatened that is the disaster of wiping them out completely there is punishment later on but that the people were not totally wiped out and later on we see that Moses realizes that this is not all that's required it's one thing for the Lord to say I'm not going to wipe them out it's another thing for the people to get back into a right relationship with the Lord it's another thing to enjoy the favor of the presence of the Lord what is the mechanism by which a holy and just God can still carry out his promises in the face of the rebellion of his redeemed people God can't break his promises and that's the fact that Moses plings onto God has made his gracious promises and

Moses his covenant mediator says God can't break those and yet God can't give up his holiness and his holiness demands the reaction of wrath in the presence of sin and the Lord himself emphatically brings that out there can be no compromise with the demands that God makes and so we see later the next day Moses tells the people you've committed a great sin but now I will go up to the Lord perhaps I can make atonement for your sin he recognizes their sin was very great and he couldn't see how God could go back on punishing sin he was convinced that if the merited judgments were to be averted there must be something fundamental done to alter the situation but how could atonement be made animals no matter how great wouldn't suffice all he could think of was offering himself and even of that he wasn't sure here is

Moses he's been on the mountaintop for 40 days he's been receiving all the details of the sacrificial law of the old testament he's been speaking with God about what all this elaborate ritual signify what it foreshadowed Moses had spent 40 days doing a course on atonement because that was what was of the essence of the symbols of the law and yet he realizes that all the regulations he's been given are going to fall short because the sin that's been committed is far more basic is far more fundamental it's direct rebellion against the commands of God and so Moses doesn't talk in terms of let's institute the sacrifices quickly let's get the tabernacle up and running he realizes things are far more serious than that he's prepared to offer himself please forgive their sin and he broke off without finishing the thought but if not block me out of the book that you have written there was Moses rising to the challenge implicit in being a mediator seeing that the relationship had broken down and offering himself in place of the people and the Lord refused his offer because ultimately Moses couldn't genuinely make that offer because Moses too was a sinner and far from being able to answer before the throne of divine justice on behalf of others he needed one to answer there for him himself but Moses had grasped something of the theological complexity of the situation of the human dilemma of the difficulty in the way of God justly exercising grace and forgiving sinners and at the same time being just

Moses was standing before the dilemma the conundrum the enigma the perplexity that was never resolved in Old Testament times of how divine wisdom would contrive a way for God to be just and the justifier of sinners Moses was from the age of shadows but the reality is in Jesus Christ Moses showed what was involved in being a mediator but he couldn't carry it through because he himself was also a sinner the mediator of the new covenant suffers from no such deficiency he is able not only to display the love and the concern for the people whom he represents fully and completely he's able to carry through the proposal that

[35:26] Moses saw was the only way forward someone stepping in the breach to make atonement someone stepping into the breach to pay the price that others couldn't pay for themselves Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house testifying to what will be said in the future but Christ is faithful as a son over God's house we have here an Old Testament pattern of a mediator faced with the problem of the people's sin faced with the problem of the reality of divine wrath realizing the need for atonement and thinking up the best that he could but he could only venture perhaps now I will go up to the Lord perhaps I can make atonement for you and the

Lord said no you can't may it be that tonight our hearts rejoice that we're not basing our lives on the perhaps of Moses but on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ that we're not basing it on the very

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true and commendable desire of Moses that the people be reconciled with God but based on the reality achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus the final mediator the one whose provision is complete guaranteed not covered by a perhaps or a maybe but guaranteed by the father himself who raised him from the dead the father who showed forth his acceptance of all that the mediator of the new covenant had completely achieved and may it be that we find on that basis the ultimate answer to the biggest question of the universe how the
God of justice can also be the God of grace Jesus Christ let us pray help us oh Lord to realize once more the wonder of thy grace and goodness it goes far beyond what our words can do justice to touch our hearts we pray that we might look away from all else and see Jesus the author and finisher of faith grant that we would see in him the complete answer to which men of old men of stature struggled to comprehend the answer to the love of God shown forth without compromise to the justice of God grant oh Lord that this would not be abstract reality but living truth giving us new hope giving us a confident foundation giving us the desire to thank the one who gave himself for us and to honour him with all that we are and all that we have oh Lord forgive our many sins look we pray thee upon us as individuals to cleanse us anew through the shed blood of the mediator look we pray thee upon our land that has run amok that has wandered far from thee and bless once more in our midst the proclamation of the gospel of truth specially oh Lord we would ask for those who are a burden on our hearts this night those known to us who wonder heedless of their eternal destiny we pray that thou wouldst use every word and act spoken in witness to Jesus to stir up to challenge and to draw to thyself we oh
Lord are poor and needy clothe and provide for us no matter how far we are walking in Jesus name amen

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