

# **REMEMBER YOUR COVENANT**

## **Exodus 32:1-14**

### **Introduction**

There are four thoughts that I want to pick out of this Bible passage today. These are: 1. Stupid People; 2. Bad Leadership; 3. Your Fault! and 4. Pleading for stupid people and bad leadership on the basis of who God is.

### **1. Stupid People**

*<sup>1</sup>When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." [TNIV]*

These Israelites are stupid!

They are stubborn and rebellious. They are impatient and whingers. They are ungrateful and demanding. All these aspects have already shown up in the short walk to Mount Sinai.

And now they are fickle and idolatrous.

In actual fact, they are just all too human!

What is happening here is that these slaves who had been brought up in a culture of hundreds of gods – the whole Egyptian range of them – now is told there is one true God.

What's more, all these gods of Egypt had idols: statues and the like, in which the god was believed to exist. Now they are being told to believe in a God who is invisible, who is not restricted to statues of wood and stone and metal.

Mind you, the Lord – the One True God – has made it plain he is the One True God. His rescue of them and care of them, which is far beyond what any other god has done, has certainly proven this.

But here they are, having to wait a whole forty days, and they revert back to their slave mentality. How quickly they forget the Lord who saved them!

It strikes me that God's people today are no different. And I'm not talking about people in general. I'm talking about you and me who know God's love for us in Jesus Christ. How quick are we to complain, become demanding, become fickle and rebellious when we have to wait on God for a little while? As if God owes us!

How often do we chase after gods – putting our trust in work, money, governments, crystals and aroma therapy and herbs, or whatever – instead of waiting for God?

Do we really trust God? Do we really believe he is our rescuer?

Now, you can think through these questions for yourself. But I think we are all just too human, just as those Israelites from long ago.

## 2. Bad Leadership

<sup>2</sup>*Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."* <sup>3</sup>*So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.* <sup>4</sup>*He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."*

<sup>5</sup>*When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."* <sup>6</sup>*So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. [TNIV]*

The second thing that strikes me about this passage is the bad leadership of Aaron.

Aaron was Moses' right-hand-man. He had been alongside Moses for all the mighty things that God had been doing. Yet he is spineless and fickle. He gives in to the ranting of these silly Israelites and makes a golden calf for them.

In fact, when Moses confronts Aaron about his lack of leadership, Aaron spins a stupid yarn about how he took the people's gold, threw into the fire, and 'hey presto' out popped a golden calf all of its own accord – it must be divine intervention or something (Ex 32:23-24)!

Yeah! Right!

What the people needed was a strong leader. Someone who would not simply go with the people's whim, but stay true to God's will, and call God's people to do the same.

And that is still what God's people need.

Pastors, for example, are not to simply do what the people say, and say only what the people want to hear.

<sup>3</sup>*For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.* <sup>4</sup>*They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.* <sup>5</sup>*But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. [2 Timothy 4:3-5, TNIV]*

I reckon St Paul's words are all too true. And there are churches where the pastor preaches more a social gospel than the true gospel: the good news of being healthy, wealthy and wise; rather than the Good News of salvation for sinners in Christ Jesus.

### 3. Your Fault

The next interesting thing that comes out of this story is how God responds:

*<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. <sup>8</sup>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.’*

*<sup>9</sup>“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup>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.” [TNIV]*

Note the second person pronouns. God’s had enough. He picks on Moses; but he also picks Moses for a new beginning, like a New Abraham.

What is interesting is that this expression of God’s anger is not the final expression of God’s will.

The people are God’s people. And God, not Moses, delivered them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai. And yet God seems to be ignoring that truth.

One can only wonder: What is going on?

What lies behind this is one of the deeper truths of what the Bible tells us about God. And that is, that God hides behind what seems to be a terrifying front – his anger – in order to make his grace, his grace amazing, all the sweeter to us. And it is this grace that we are to hold onto.

### 4. Pleading for stupid people

And so Moses intervenes.

*<sup>11</sup>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? <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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.’ ” <sup>14</sup>Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. [TNIV]*

What I find heart-warming is the argument Moses uses. He does not try to convince God to relent on the basis of some streak of goodness hidden in these people.

I often here people prattle on about how God should help someone

because they are a ‘pretty good Christian’, or some such argument.

No, what Moses does is plead to God on the basis of who God is. And not the terrifying angry front. But the God of grace, the God who is our rescuer. Look at the points he makes:

- God has made a covenant with the People of Israel.
- God is the one who is merciful to sinners.
- God is the one who is the rescuer of slaves.
- Moses even uses the neat little argument of embarrassment: What would the Egyptians think if God wiped out the people he rescued?

I think we should pray the same sort of way, whether for ourselves or for other people. We have nothing worthy of ourselves by which to bargain with God about anything: rain, forgiveness, healing – whatever. But we do have a God whom Jesus revealed to us as loving, kind, patient, healing, forgiving, faithful. And so we pray to God according to what God is like, not according to what we are like.

- We pray for good weather, not because we deserve it, but because God in his kindness *sends rain on the just and unjust* [Matt 5:45].
- We pray for forgiveness, not because we have such good moral fibre and simply made a mistake, but because God is merciful.
- We pray for healing, not because it’s unfair that we become sick, but because God loves us.
- We pray to God, not because of our promise to God – holding up our faith as some sort of bargaining chip. Rather we pray to God because of his promise to us in Christ: you are my people! He who did not spare his own Son, but gave *him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* [Rom 8:32, TNIV]

## Conclusion

To sum up:

1. May God keep us from our own stupidity – from straying from God and putting our trust in human made things. Rather may we trust God all the time.
2. May God give us good, strong leaders in the church; and may we follow them.
3. May we not lose heart, when God seems angry and aloof.
4. And may we pray always – for ourselves and others; and on the basis of who God is – his good, pleasing and perfect will [Rom 12:2] which he has shown us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.