

INTRODUCTION

Cleanup is never a fun job. We have some very hospitable families among us. They open their homes for gatherings. But when the party is over everything has to be restored to the original state. There is trash to be collected, furniture to be returned to their positions, dishes to be washed, and floor and bathrooms to be scrubbed. In our study today, Moses had to deal with a bigger cleanup. Last Sunday we were in chapter 20. Moses went up to Mount Saini to receive God's Law. We will do a big jump and advance to chapter 32. The content that we skip contains the instructions on how to build the tabernacle and its accessories, and how to prepare the priests for service. Those are excellent reading materials if you have a hard time going to sleep, because they are some of the most boring parts of the Bible! They may not be the best passages for a sermon. Instead, we will cover an important story in chapter 32. God asked Moses to go down the hill to do some cleanup because the Israelites sinned by worshipping a golden calf. How would Moses feel? Frustrated, angry and perhaps even embarrassed. How much longer could he bear with this group of rebellious people? Moses could have quit and gone back to Midian with his family. He could have dodged the problem or found fault in others. But he did not do any of those things. Moses showed us what a godly leader should behave when his followers went astray. Moses focused on God's character and His promises, and he steered people back to the right course. Those are the very things every church leader should keep in mind.

EXPLANATION

1. Plot 計謀

First, let us take a look at this wicked plot of idolatry. The Bible says that by now Moses had been gone for forty days. No one had any idea when he would return. The Israelites wondered what to do next. They came to Aaron with an idea in **verse 1**: ...“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.” Since their leader was now missing they proposed to build an idol so that they could have a new leader to follow. Aaron fulfilled their wish. He asked people to collect some gold ear-rings and used the material to craft an idol. Continue to read **verse 4**: 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, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” Why a calf? It was a main deity they saw in Egypt. With a new god in place, Aaron even invited the Israelites to pay tribute to their new god. Look at **verse 6**: 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. The word translated as “revelry” can be understood as having fun. Some Bible commentators suggested that the term may indicate sexual immorality. It was a common practice in idol worship. Why was this plot of idolatry so significant? Just weeks ago, before God descended onto Mount Saini, He told the people that He had chosen them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The people agreed in **19:8** that: ...“We will do everything the Lord has said.”... They did not follow God as they promised. They did the opposite and created an idol, not to represent God but to replace God! They went back to their old way and

followed what the Egyptians did to bow down before a statue. It was a great attraction to believe in what they could actually see. People who created idols also made up their own rules to justify their sinful behaviors. Therefore, idol worship does not only substitute the one true God with counterfeits, it also shifts the focus from honoring God to fulfilling our human desires. However, as Christians, we must not reduce God to any visible image. We worship Him in our hearts. After Jesus' ascension to heaven, God the Father sent the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of the believers. Think about it: God dwells in those who claim Jesus to be their Lord! Do you realize that when you walk into this church, or just about any Christian church, you cannot find any painting of Jesus? We do not want people to fixate in their minds that this is how Jesus looks like. It is easy for people to find comfort in something tangible. The church where I served before used to have a center video projector. There is a moveable screen at the back. Actually, we have the same setup in our church before we installed the side-projectors and screens. Someone in that church complained to the coworkers that she did not feel peaceful because she cannot see the cross behind the screen. I did not know who that person was, but I could not help but wonder if she had fallen into the trap of idol worship. She might have treated the cross as her idol. There are at least six crosses hanging inside my home. They are either gifts given by others or crafts my kids made at vacation Bible school. They are just decorations. They will not bring me good fortune or chase away demons. I do not feel any difference whether it is a cross or a photo of natural scenery on the wall. We do not need any visible image to remind us of our relationship with God. It is okay if you have a cross pendant around your neck, as long as you do not worship it. The Holy Spirit is in our hearts. He reminds us God's Word. God is always close to us whether or not there is an object to remind us of His presence.

2. Plea 代求

The Israelites worshipped a golden calf. God told Moses to quickly go down the hill to deal with the situation. Instead of asking God to judge His people as they well deserved, Moses pleaded for God's pardon. God revealed to Moses how He would treat the Israelites. **Verse 10** reads: "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." God intended to eradicate the Israelites and raised up Moses' descendants as replacements. In the future there would not be any Israelite, people would call them "Moses-lites." Moses was not interested in such a great honor. God was not obligated to disclose His plan to Moses. Why did He do that? A close analogy I can think of is when a lady told her boyfriend that she would break up with him. Overcome with grief, the guy responded: "Mary, you can't do that. If you don't marry me I will jump into the Mississippi River!" Go ahead. He said so because he hoped that the woman would stop him. God expected Moses to do the same thing. What follow in verses 11-13 was a passionate plea. Let us see what we can learn from Moses. **Verse 11**: But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "O Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" Moses reminded God that the Israelites were His own people. He should show compassion to them. Next, we look at **verse 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." Moses said God should care about His own face. If God indeed destroyed the Israelites, He would bring shame to Himself. The Egyptians might think that God did not have the capability to watch over His people. Then Moses also reminded God about His promises. **Verse 13** reads:

“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.’” Moses intentionally replaced Jacob’s name with Israel. Back then God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. In Moses’ mind, the children of Israel from all the twelve tribes would take possession of the land of Canaan. The promises were not only for the Levites or the heirs of Moses. In sum, Moses did not appeal to God’s mercy, because he understood that the Israelites did not deserve it. Rather, Moses appealed to God’s faithfulness. Nothing should change God’s original plan. Moses cared about his fellow Israelites despite their rebellion. The second part of his plea appeared in **verse 32**: “But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” Moses would rather be removed from God’s eternal blessing if God insisted on His judgment. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul expressed the same compassion for his fellow Jews. He said in **Romans 9:3** - For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race. Paul loved his people, but he was deeply concerned about their spiritual status. Paul hoped that one day all the Jews would turn to Christ, even at the expense of losing his own salvation! Any spiritual leader should learn from Moses and Paul. Church ministry is about people, not projects. People are disobedient by nature. You have the best interest in mind for the people God calls you to lead. However, sometimes they will not listen. Worse still, they may question your motive, spread rumors to attack you and even betray you. Someone said it right: sheep will bite their shepherd! As a pastor, I can tell you that I have seen the beauty and the ugliness of humanity, even from the same group of people I serve! How would you deal with rebellious people? You can cry “It is unfair!” and ask God to exercise His justice. But Moses showed us an alternative. He pleaded for his own people.

3. Penalty 懲罰

The Israelites came up with a plot to worship idol. Moses pleaded to God on behalf of his people. God once again bestowed His grace to the Israelites. But every sin has its consequence. Here, God exercised His penalty through Moses. **Verses 19-20** tell us how Moses reacted when he saw it with his own eyes the rebellion of the Israelites: 19 When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. 20 And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. First, Moses smashed the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. A commentator pointed out that the traditional thinking of five commandments on each tablet may not be accurate. Actually, each stone contained all Ten Commandments. In the ancient times, when two parties made a covenant each side would keep one copy of the terms. Therefore, in this case it was like God kept a copy and the Israelites kept another copy of the covenant. Moses shattered the tablets not only because he was enraged. It had a symbolic meaning that the Israelites had breached God’s covenant. They abandoned God and created an idol. Second, Moses made the Israelites drink water that had the powder from the golden calf. The point was to defile the idol when the powder was passed out from the people’s bodies. Then Moses also initiated a cleansing of the idol worshippers. He called for those who were still faithful to God. The Levites stepped forward. Then Moses told them in **verses 27-28**: 27 ...“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” 28 The

Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. The idol worshippers were killed. It tells us at least two things. First, God's holiness is not something anyone should mess with. Second, there is always a penalty for sin. It is true that God listened to Moses' plea and chose not to destroy all the Israelites. However, God's people received the penalty they deserved. To the rest of the people who were spared it was a serious warning for their disobedience. Throughout the Bible, God used similar ways to discipline His people. In Joshua chapter 7, Achan kept some of the plunder God forbade from a war. Achen later confessed his sin, but he and his whole family were judged. In the early church, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles about their offering. Peter confronted the couple and God struck them dead. Back to the Exodus passage. Why was Aaron preserved even though he was a main contributor to the plot? As a leader, he did not reject the people's idea of building the idol. He collected gold from them and crafted the calf. He even asked the people to present animal sacrifices to the idol! The passage does not tell us why God did not punish Aaron. All we can conclude is that if God deals with us the way we deserve, it is His justice. But if God chooses to overlook our sins, it is His grace and mercy. From the Old to the New Testament there is a consistent message that God disciplines His children because He loves them. **Hebrews 12:10-11** say: 10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. God uses discipline to purify us and to bring back His wayward children. The Israelites still had many lessons to learn. We know their history in the Bible. They tested God over and over again. Later on, there will be forty years of wilderness wandering and the Babylonian exile. They reaped the consequence of breaking God's covenant. Even today, God has the same heart toward us. We will continue to sin in many ways. When God's discipline comes we should quickly turn back from our sins. Do not take God's love for granted. Do not wear out His patience.

CONCLUSION

A godly leader focuses on God's character and His promises, and steers people back to the right course. A leader stands as a mediator between people and God. He knows the sinfulness of men, but he also understands the faithfulness of God. He firmly believes that although people will change for the worse, God would never change. It is challenging for a leader to stand firm when the people around him fall to sin. What sustains him is a strong foundation built upon God's unfailing truth. Just last week, hurricane Michael hammered the northwestern coast of Florida. Violent wind destroyed a lot of buildings. But there was one house in the city of Mexico Beach that suffered only minimal damage. When the owners built the house just last year they invested double the cost to prepare for the worst hurricane. In the southern part of Florida, where multiple hurricanes pass by every year, has a stringent building code. The houses have to withstand 175 MPH wind. But this cottage is in the Florida panhandle, where hurricane attack is much less frequent. The reason why it survived hurricane Michael is because it was built to endure 250 MPH wind. There are 40-foot pillars that buried deep into the ground. At strategic spots there are reinforcements of concrete and steel. What makes a godly leader stands while the people around him crumble like shaky buildings in a storm? It is a strong relationship with God. It is the faith that God will never violate His words or forsake His people.