

EXODUS 33:12-23 & MATTHEW 22:15-22

THE HYMN “TRUST AND OBEY”, OPENS WITH THE WORDS: “WHEN WE WALK WITH THE LORD, IN THE LIGHT OF HIS WORD, WHAT A GLORY HE SHEDS ON OUR WAY. WHILE WE DO HIS GOOD WILL, HE ABIDES WITH US STILL, AND WITH ALL WHO WILL TRUST AND OBEY.”

THESE WORDS POINT TO AN OFTEN REPEATED MESSAGE IN SCRIPTURE, CALLING US TO FAITH IN AND SUBMISSION TO, GOD.

HOWEVER, AS BOTH MANY BIBLE STORIES, AND OUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SHOWS- IT IS NOT EASY AT TIMES TO RELY ON FAITH ALONE, OR TO REMAIN OBEDIENT TO GOD.

THIS IS ONE REASON WE NEED ONE ANOTHER’S SUPPORT, AS WELL AS GOD’S HELP.

IT IS ALSO THE REASON WHY PEOPLE, EVEN THE ISRAELITES, LONGED FOR WHAT THEY COULD NOT HAVE- A GOD THEY COULD SEE AND TOUCH.

CHAPTER 32 OF EXODUS TELLS ABOUT THE DISASTROUS EFFORTS OF THEIR ATTEMPT TO MAKE A TANGIBLE IMAGE OF GOD.

TODAY’S READING IS A CONTINUATION OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE GOLDEN CALF INCIDENT, AND MOSES’ REQUEST THAT GOD NOT DESTROY THE HEBREW PEOPLE BECAUSE OF THEIR SIN.

THE PASSAGE REVEALS GOD LISTENED TO THE PRAYER OF MOSES AND GRANTED HIS REQUEST FOR MERCY.

CHAPTER 33 BEGINS WITH GOD COMMANDING MOSES TO LEAD THE PEOPLE FORWARD TOWARDS THE LAND, GOD HAD PROMISED ABRAHAM, HIS DESCENDANTS WOULD INHABIT.

BUT MOSES WAS THEN TOLD THAT THE LORD WAS RELUCTANT TO REMAIN WITH HIS PEOPLE.

THEREFORE, GOD SAID THAT HE WOULD SEND AN ANGEL TO CLEAR THE WAY FOR MOSES AND HIS PEOPLE. WHEN THE PEOPLE HEARD GOD WOULD NOT GO WITH THEM THEY WERE AFRAID AND BEGAN TO MOURN.

THIS MAY SEEM LIKE AN ODD REACTION FOR PEOPLE WHO HAD ONLY RECENTLY BROKEN THE FIRST AND SECOND COMMANDMENTS.

BUT THE HEBREW PEOPLE, MUCH LIKE PEOPLE TODAY, MOVED BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN FAITH AND DOUBT, TRUSTING IN GOD AND TRUSTING IN SOMETHING ELSE.

WE HAVE MANY STORIES IN EXODUS ABOUT GOD’S PEOPLE NOT TRUSTING. BUT INSTEAD COMPLAINING GOD HAD SET THEM UP TO DIE IN THE WILDERNESS.

OF COURSE, AFTER GOD DEFEATED PHARAOH’S ARMY IN THE WATERS OF THE SEA, THE PEOPLE REJOICED.

BUT THEIR REJOICING DID NOT LAST FOR LONG. FOR EXAMPLE: THEY SOON COMPLAINED THAT THE LORD LED THEM INTO THE DESERT TO DIE OF THIRST, OR STARVATION.

SO WE SEE, THAT WHILE THEY TRUSTED GOD WHEN THINGS WENT WELL, AS SOON AS PROBLEMS AROSE, THEY IMMEDIATELY LOST FAITH.

BUT EVEN WHEN THINGS WERE GOING GOOD FOR THEM THE PEOPLE SHOWED ONLY MINIMAL TRUST FOR. OR OBEDIENCE TO-GOD.

CONSEQUENTLY, THE LORD TOLD MOSES TO TELL THE PEOPLE TO GO ON WITHOUT HIM, WITH ONLY AN ANGEL TO GUIDE THEM.

“GO UP TO THE LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY. BUT I WILL NOT GO WITH YOU, BECAUSE YOU ARE A STIFFED-NECKED PEOPLE AND I MIGHT DESTROY YOU ON THE WAY.”

MOSES, HOWEVER, WAS NOT SATISFIED WITH AN ANGEL OF THE LORD, HE WOULD NOT SETTLE FOR ANYONE LESS THAN GOD.

IN ESSENCE, MOSES WOULD NOT OBEY, HE PUT HIS FOOT DOWN AND SAID HE AND THE PEOPLE WOULD GO WITH GOD'S PRESENCE- OR NOT AT ALL.

SURELY, MOSES, SENSED HIS ROLE AS LEADER OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE WAS DOOMED TO FAILURE WITHOUT GOD'S PRESENCE.

IT WAS THE PRESENCE OF GOD WITH HIM THAT BOTH DROVE MOSES AND SUSTAINED HIM, THUS ENABLING HIM TO FULFILL HIS PURPOSE AS A LEADER OF THE ISRAELITES.

MOSES KNEW THAT HE NEEDED GOD TO GO WITH HIM, AND THAT GOD'S PEOPLE NEEDED GOD'S PRESENCE AS WELL, IF THEY WERE TO REALLY BE GOD'S PEOPLE.

SO MOSES BOLDLY TOLD THE LORD THAT HIS TERMS WERE UNACCEPTABLE.

GOD RESPONDED HE WOULD BE WITH MOSES ALONE, BUT HIS PRESENCE WOULD NOT BE WITH THE REST OF THE PEOPLE.

MOSES REPLIED-"IF YOUR PRESENCE WILL NOT GO WITH US, DO NOT SEND US FROM HERE."

HE THEN PLEADED IF GOD WAS REALLY PLEASED WITH HIM, THE LORD WOULD GO WITH HIS PEOPLE ALSO.

GOD AGREED, REMINDING MOSES IT WAS ONLY BECAUSE HE WAS PLEASED WITH MOSES, HE WOULD GRANT THE REQUEST FOR HIS HOLY PRESENCE TO GO WITH ALL OF THEM.

THIS PASSAGE PROVIDES US WITH FOOD FOR THOUGHT, AND ONE THING IT SHOWS IS- THE POWER OF PRAYER.

NOTICE THAT GOD DID NOT GET ANGRY AT MOSES WHEN HE REFUSED TO OBEY THE INITIAL COMMAND TO LEAVE THE MOUNTAIN AND LET THE ANGEL LEAD THEM.

MOSES' REFUSAL WAS NOT OUT OF REBELLION AGAINST GOD, BUT OUT OF A DESIRE TO FULFILL HIS ROLE AS MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE LORD AND THE ISRAELITES.

THEREFORE, GOD WELCOMED THE INTERACTION WITH MOSES, WHO HUMBLY, YET INSISTENTLY, SOUGHT GOD'S PRESENCE FOR HIMSELF, AS WELL AS FOR ALL THE PEOPLE.

NOTICE, THAT MOSES INITIAL REFUSAL TO OBEY WAS BASED ON HIS TRUST THAT UNLESS GOD WENT WITH THEM THEY WERE LOST. AND GOD ACCEPTED THIS ARGUMENT.

HERE IN HIS CONVERSATION WITH THE LORD, WE FIND THAT MOSES WAS NOT TIMID ABOUT ASKING FOR HIS OWN NEED WHICH WAS TO KNOW GOD'S WAYS BETTER.

AND HE WAS JUST AS BOLD ABOUT BRINGING TO THE LORD'S ATTENTION, THE NEED OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE TO HAVE THE LORD GO WITH THEM.

THIS NEED IS SOMETHING THAT IS REPEATED OVER AND OVER AGAIN IN VARIOUS WAYS, ESPECIALLY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

FOR EXAMPLE: PLEADING FOR GOD'S PRESENCE TO BE WITH HIS PEOPLE IS BEAUTIFULLY EXPRESSED IN MANY PSALMS:

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ONES IS -PSALM 67:1, WHICH SAYS "MAY GOD BE GRACIOUS TO US AND BLESS US, AND MAKE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON US."

REMEMBER, "FACE" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT IN PARTICULAR, IS A METAPHOR FOR "PRESENCE" OR "SELF".

AND THE PRAYER IN THE PSALM IS A REPHRASING OF THE PRIESTLY BLESSING FROM NUMBERS CHAPTER SIX.

THIS IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF THE EXPRESSION OF NEEDING FOR GOD TO BE WITH HIS PEOPLE, COLLECTIVELY AND INDIVIDUALLY.

TODAY'S PASSAGE FROM EXODUS SHOWS US THE POWER OF SUCH PRAYERS-WHEN PRAYED IN THE CONTEXT OF TRULY SEEKING A CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

LET US TURN NOW TO ANOTHER THING WE FIND IN THE PASSAGE, WHICH IS THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP MOSES HAD WITH GOD.

NOTICE THAT MOSES DID NOT STOP WITH HIS REQUESTS TO THE LORD AFTER GOD PROMISED TO GO WITH ALL OF THE PEOPLE.

MOSES THEN BOLDLY ASKED FOR PERSONAL REASSURANCE FROM THE LORD, AS IF HE WERE SUFFERING FROM A LACK OF TRUST- SIMILAR THOSE HE WAS LEADING.

MOSES, IN FACT, WANTED SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE TANGIBLE THAN GOD'S VOICE, A BURNING BUSH, OR THE STONE TABLETS OF THE COMMANDMENTS- WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF GOD.

HE ASKED THE LORD "SHOW ME YOUR GLORY", WHICH WAS A WAY OF WANTING TO SEE GOD FACE TO FACE.

THE LORD EXPLAINED THIS COULD NOT BE, BECAUSE MOSES WOULD NOT SURVIVE THE ENCOUNTER.

HOWEVER, GOD OFFERED A COMPROMISE BY GIVING MOSES A GLIMPSE OF HIS PRESENCE IN THE FORM OF HIS GOODNESS.

GOD HID MOSES IN THE CLEFT OF A ROCK, AND COVERED HIM SO HE COULD NOT SEE GOD, UNTIL GOD'S BACK CAME INTO VIEW, AND THEN MOSES WAS GIVEN A PEAK.

MOSES SAW THE BACK OF GOD, SYMBOLIZING PERHAPS, THAT BOTH MOSES AND THE PEOPLE WOULD FOLLOW THE LORD.

GOD ALSO DESCRIBED HIMSELF, REPEATING THE NAME MOSES RECEIVED AT THE BURNING BUSH; "THE LORD", OR "YHWH" IN HEBREW.

HE ALSO DECLARED HIS GOODNESS AND SOVEREIGNTY SAYING: "I WILL BE GRACIOUS TO WHOM I WILL BE GRACIOUS, AND WILL SHOW MERCY TO WHOM I WILL SHOW MERCY."

THIS INCIDENT IS A REMINDER TO US THAT NOT ALL OF OUR PRAYERS, EVEN THOSE SAID WITH GREAT FAITH AND SINCERITY, WILL BE GRANTED BY GOD.

MOSES WAS NOT CAPABLE OF RECEIVING EXACTLY WHAT HE ASKED OF THE LORD, BUT GOD GAVE HIM WHAT HE COULD ENDURE.

SO ALSO AT TIMES WHAT WE ASK FOR IS NOT GOOD FOR US, BUT GOD MAY FULFILL PART OF OUR PRAYER.

HERE AGAIN WE ARE REMINDED TO TRUST AND OBEY EVEN WHEN WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE WAY IN WHICH GOD ANSWERS CERTAIN PRAYERS.

JESUS, YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED, ALSO DID NOT ALWAYS ANSWER DIRECTLY, SOME OF THE QUESTIONS HE WAS ASKED, AS THE GOSPEL STORIES REVEAL.

TODAY'S LESSON IS ABOUT A GROUP OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR LEADERS WHO ATTEMPTED TO TRAP JESUS WITH YET ANOTHER TRICK QUESTION.

THEY ASKED JESUS TO MAKE A RULING ABOUT THE HATED "POLL TAX".

THIS TAX WAS IMPOSED ON EVERY PERSON, AND IT HAD TO BE PAID WITH A ROMAN COIN, WHICH MADE IT EVEN MORE OFFENSIVE TO MOST JEWS.

IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, JESUS ASKED FOR AND RECEIVED A COIN FROM ONE OF THE QUESTIONERS.

HE THEN ASKED FOR THEM TO SAY WHOSE HEAD WAS ON THE COIN.

IT WAS, OF COURSE AN IMAGE OF CAESAR, WHICH LED JESUS TO SAY HIS NOW FAMOUS DECLARATION:

"GIVE TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S, AND GIVE TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.

TO GET AT WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF THE SAVIOR'S MESSAGE FOUND IN HIS REPLY WE CAN TURN TO ANOTHER VERSE OF THE HYMN "TRUST AND OBEY."

"BUT WE NEVER CAN PROVE THE DELIGHTS OF HIS LOVE, UNTIL ALL ON THE ALTAR WE LAY.

FOR THE FAVOR HE SHOWS, FOR THE JOY HE BESTOWS ARE FOR THOSE WHO WILL TRUST AND OBEY."

THE KEY PHRASE IS- "UNTIL ALL ON THE ALTAR WE LAY." THIS IS WHAT GIVING TO GOD WHAT BELONGS TO GOD MEANS FOR US.

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THE COIN JESUS HELD UP WITH THE IMAGE OF CAESAR, IT PROCLAIMED THE ULTIMATE OWNER OF THE COIN WAS THE ROMAN EMPEROR, BECAUSE IT BORE HIS IMAGE.

BUT WHAT, IF ANYTHING, DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US? IT HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH US BECAUSE OF WHOSE IMAGE WE BEAR.

GENESIS 1:27 EXPLAINS IT ALL: "SO GOD CREATED HUMANKIND IN HIS IMAGE...MALE AND FEMALE, HE CREATED THEM."

CONSEQUENTLY, IF WE ARE TO GIVE BACK TO GOD WHAT BEARS THE IMAGE OF GOD, IT MEANS WE GIVE OURSELVES.

THIS WAS THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE JESUS WAS SENDING TO THE JEWISH LEADERS, PEOPLE, AND HIS OWN DISCIPLES.

IT IS TO GOD WE OWE OUR FOUNDATIONAL LOYALTY, TRUST, AND OBEDIENCE.

ALL OTHER RELATIONSHIPS AND LOYALTIES FLOW OUT OF THIS FIRST ONE.

THUS THE STORY IS NOT REALLY ABOUT PAYING TAXES, BUT ABOUT PUTTING OUR LIVES IN THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE.

IT IS ABOUT RECOGNIZING THERE IS NO PLACE WE CAN GO WITHOUT GOD, BECAUSE WE ALL BEAR THE IMAGE OF OUR CREATOR.

THIS IS THE DEEP THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE HIDDEN WITHIN THE CLEVER ANSWER JESUS GAVE THAT DAY.

WHETHER OR NOT A PERSON REALIZES IT, GIVING TO GOD WHAT WE OWE TO OUR CREATOR AND SAVIOR IS THE BASIS FOR OUR LIVES.

THUS, ACCEPTING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH CHRIST IS BOTH THE ANSWER TO OUR GREATEST NEED, AND THE FULFILLMENT OF THE HIGHEST LONGING OF OUR SOULS.

LET US PRAY: GOD, SOURCE OF ALL THAT IS, LOVER OF JUSTICE, YOU HAVE PLACED YOUR IMPRINT ON US AND CHALLENGED US TO BE YOUR PEOPLE IN THOUGHT, WORD, AND DEED.

BY YOUR SPIRIT, HELP US TO LIVE BOLDLY, BY FAITHFULLY REFLECTING THE IMAGE OF CHRIST OUR SAVIOR TO THE WORLD.

EMBOLDEN US TO SHARE WITH OTHERS THE GIFT OF GRACE THAT YOU HAVE SO ABUNDANTLY GIVEN US. IN JESUS' NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

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