



Chapter VIII

A Journey that Tests the Heart

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The road from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land was a bumpy one for Israel, filled with examples of heroic virtue but also fraught with many failures and lack of trust in God's love. We will walk this challenging road with Israel, focusing on four key moments in the journey. In this chapter, we will look at the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai (Ex 24) and the people's idolatry in worshiping a golden calf (Ex 32). In the next chapter, we will see how the people surprisingly reject the land God promised them and are punished to wander in the desert for forty years (Nm 14) and how at the end of this period, a new generation of Israelites squander an opportunity to start anew with God by falling into idolatry like their parents did at Sinai, this time with one of the gods of the people in the new land (Nm 25).

At every step of the way, we will see God testing the hearts of His people and the people coming up short. The forty-year journey of testing will make it abundantly clear that the people have hearts that are weak, selfish, and fearful, incapable of following His commandments. But the difficult journey ends with Moses offering hope for the future, announcing a great healing work that God will eventually accomplish: a healing of their hearts, which will cause them to walk in God's ways. This is one of the first clear foreshadowings of the healing power of God's grace in the Bible. God will solve the problem of man's sinful heart and enable His people to do what they could never do on their

own. With this future spiritual healing in mind, Moses can finally say to the people something he has never been able to say confidently before— “You will love the Lord your God with all your *heart*” (Dt 30:6, emphasis added).

Test No. 1: The Heart of Worship

A crucial event in Israel’s desert journey comes in Exodus 24, which tells one of the most astonishing stories in the Old Testament. After freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and bringing them to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God now invites the Israelite leaders up the mountain to share a meal in His divine presence.

For many Christian readers in the twenty-first century, this ritual meal may not mean much. For the ancient Israelites, however, sharing a meal had powerful symbolic connotations, expressing covenant unity and a shared life. For them, to share a meal meant that all at the table were like family. In fact, meals were so important that two enemies making a peace treaty could solidify their new covenant relationship by eating a meal together. The former enemies would leave the table as covenant partners, even using the language of family to describe their new committed friendship. Even adversaries become brothers through covenant meals (see Gn 18:26-33). Therefore, when we read about the Israelite leaders having a *meal* in God’s presence, we should see this as a pivotal moment in Israel’s relationship with the Lord. This ritual meal symbolizes the intimate covenant relationship God is now forging with His people.

Let’s take a closer look at the structure of this covenant ceremony at Sinai, where we will discover that each of the ritual words and actions are rich in meaning. They shed light on the kind of relationship God

wants with Israel and even tell us about the kind of relationship God wants to have with us today.

Bloody Sacrifice

As the leader of this ceremony, Moses first proclaims “all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances” to the people. In turn, the Israelites respond to God’s commandments with faith and commitment, saying, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex 24: 3).

Second, Moses leads the people in a sacrificial rite that has three parts: the offering of animals, a blood ritual, and a communion meal. Each part is packed with symbolic significance.

Sacrifice: The sacrifices offered at Mount Sinai are all about God examining the hearts of His people. Will Israel’s heart be truly for Yahweh or for the false gods of the pagan nations? As we saw in the last chapter, God required Israel to go into the wilderness to sacrifice animals that were associated with Egyptian deities (see Ex 8:25-27). Now that they have escaped Egypt, the Israelites have arrived at this mountain in the desert to perform the sacrificial ritual. While animal sacrifice has many levels of significance in the Old Testament, here it symbolizes a rejection of those Egyptian deities represented by those animals and a renewal of Israel’s loyalty to Yahweh as the one, true God. Thus, in a sense, this particular sacrifice at Sinai could be seen as a ritual enactment of the First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God....You shall not have any other strange gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3).

Blood Ritual: Next, Moses performs a ritual in which he gathers the blood from the animals into basins and sprinkles half of it on the altar as an offering to God and throws the rest of it on the people. What is

the significance of this strange ritual? For the ancient Israelites, blood symbolized life, and similar to sharing a meal, the sharing of blood symbolized the sharing of life and covenant union. Therefore, with half the blood being offered to God on the altar and half the blood being poured on the people, this act would symbolize a new shared life between Israel and the Lord. Now, one of the main goals of the exodus is achieved: The people of Israel have formally become one in covenant with the Almighty God.

Communion Meal: Finally, the consummation of this ceremony at Sinai is a communion meal symbolically shared between the leaders of Israel and Yahweh Himself. “Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.... They beheld God, and ate and drank” (Ex 24:9, 11). Because sharing a meal signifies covenant union, the fact that the Israelite leaders eat this covenant meal in God’s presence symbolizes the profound relationship God forges with His people. Through this ritual, they have become sealed as God’s covenant family.

Going to Sinai, Going to Mass

This ritual at Sinai is not only important for understanding a foundational moment in Israel’s relationship with God; it also tells us a lot about how we Christians are to worship the Lord today, for the specifics of this ritual at Mount Sinai reflect a divine pattern for worship. Already in the time of Moses, God establishes the basic structure for worship that He desires to be used for the rest of time. Note how, at Sinai, there is found a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of Sacrifice. Moses first proclaims the Word of God and then leads the people in sacrifice, a blood ritual, and a communion meal.

This pattern continues throughout the history of Israel and is

fulfilled ultimately in the Eucharist that Jesus institutes. The Mass we celebrate today starts with the Liturgy of the Word and ends with a Eucharistic liturgy of *sacrifice*, in which Christ's sacrifice on the cross is made present (see Catechism, nos. 1362-67). We share Christ's *blood* and partake of His crucified and resurrected body in a *communion meal*. Therefore, when Catholics worship God in the Mass, they are not following the practices invented merely by some human pastor, minister, or theologian; they are participating in the divine order of worship that Jesus established at the Last Supper in the Eucharist—a liturgical structure that God foreshadowed long before, going all the way back to what He revealed at Sinai in the time of Moses.

Test No. 2: The Golden Calf

The Israelites' newly affirmed faithfulness at Sinai is about to be tested by the absence of their anointed leader. At the end of the covenant meal, the glory-cloud manifesting God's presence descends on Mount Sinai and Moses enters its midst, where he remains for forty days and forty nights, unseen by the Israelites at the base of the mountain (Ex 24:18).

Once again, God wants to see what is in their hearts. How do the Israelites fare? "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, 'Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him'" (Ex 32:1). Alone in the desert wilderness and uncertain about what happened to Moses, the people give in to their fears and their hearts turn back toward Egypt as they fall into idolatry. Although they speak about dedicating a feast to the Lord (Ex 32:5), they idolatrously worship the image of a golden bull calf, reminiscent of the Egyptian god Apis (Ex 32:4). As was typical of many pagan rituals, Israel's worship

of the golden calf included debauchery, drunkenness, and sexual immorality, which is reflected by the Hebrew idiom, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Ex 32:6).

If the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24 represents a high point in Israel’s relationship with God, the events surrounding the golden calf apostasy mark one of the lowest. In the covenant ceremony, the leaders ate, drank, and beheld God (Ex 24:11). Now the people eat, drink, and engage in sexual play as they worship the golden idol. So devastating was this sin for Israel that one could call it a “second fall,” marking a fundamental break in Israel’s relationship with God. What Adam did in the garden as an individual rebelling against God, Israel did as a nation at Sinai.

And at least in some respects, the sin at Sinai appears graver. The people fall into idolatry *after* they have witnessed God’s great love for them, liberating them from slavery with many miracles in Egypt and drawing them into intimate covenant union with Him on Sinai. Moreover, the people just accepted the First Commandment about not having other gods before Yahweh, solemnly promising to keep it (Ex 24:7). To turn to idolatry after all this is a complete rejection of the God who so lovingly rescued them and the God to whom they just vowed their loyalty.

‘Your People’

The radical rupture in Israel’s relationship with Yahweh is reflected in God’s words to Moses on top of Sinai, informing him of the idolatry at the base of the mountain:

Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned

aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32:7-8)

Notice how God seems to disown the people, no longer speaking of Israel as His own but as the people whom Moses brought out of Egypt ("*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land"). Yet God's words merely reflect Israel's tragic choice that day: God offered the people covenant friendship, but they reject Him and instead worship the golden calf. In doing so, they put themselves outside of the covenant union God extended to them. God's language, therefore, simply reflects Israel's decision not to live in covenant with Yahweh.

The devastating impact on Israel's relationship with the Lord is also seen when God refers to the how the people "have corrupted themselves" (Ex 32:7). The Hebrew word here for "corrupted" is used in the Bible to describe a defective animal that is disqualified for sacrifice (Lv 22:25). It is also used to describe a fault that makes a man unfit for priestly service (Lv 19:7). Thus, although Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5-6), its people are now, after the golden calf apostasy, likened to a blemished animal and a disqualified priest who is unable to draw near to God's presence in the sanctuary. This is a sad time in Israel's history, but it isn't the end of their story. We'll see in the next chapter how God continues to lead his people.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Exodus 24:1-11, Exodus 32:1-9

Please read aloud: The road from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land was a bumpy one for Israel, filled with examples of heroic virtue but also fraught with many failures and lack of trust in God's love. We will walk this challenging road with Israel, focusing on four key moments in the journey. In this chapter, we will look 2 of those moments: the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai (Ex 24) and the people's idolatry in worshiping a golden calf (Ex 32).

Read Exodus 24:1-11

Please read aloud: Let's take a closer look at the structure of this covenant ceremony at Sinai, where we will discover that each of the ritual words and actions are rich in meaning. They shed light on the kind of relationship God wants with Israel and even tell us about the kind of relationship God wants to have with us today.

Moses leads the people in a sacrificial rite that has three parts: the offering of animals, a blood ritual, and a communion meal. Each part is packed with symbolic significance.

First, the sacrifice: As we saw in the last chapter, God required Israel to go into the wilderness to sacrifice animals that were associated with

Egyptian deities (see Ex 8:25-27). Now that they have escaped Egypt, the Israelites have arrived at this mountain in the desert to perform the sacrificial ritual.

1. Thinking back to the last chapter, what is the significance of sacrificing these animals? What are the people of Israel professing by making these sacrifices?

Answer: While animal sacrifice has many levels of significance in the Old Testament, here it symbolizes a rejection of those Egyptian deities represented by those animals and a renewal of Israel's loyalty to Yahweh as the one, true God. Thus, in a sense, this particular sacrifice at Sinai could be seen as a ritual enactment of the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God....You shall not have any other strange gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3).

Please read aloud: Next, Moses performs a ritual in which he gathers the blood from the animals into basins and sprinkles half of it on the altar as an offering to God and throws the rest of it on the people.

2. What might be the significance of this strange ritual?

Answer: For the ancient Israelites, blood symbolized life, and similar to sharing a meal, the sharing of blood symbolized the sharing of life and covenant union. With half the blood being offered to God on the altar and half the blood being poured on the people, this act would symbolize a new shared life between Israel and the Lord. Now, one of the main goals of the exodus is achieved: The people of Israel have formally become one in covenant with the Almighty God.

Please read aloud: Finally, the consummation of this ceremony at Sinai is a communion meal symbolically shared between the leaders of Israel and Yahweh Himself. "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.... They beheld God, and ate and drank" (Ex 24:9, 11).

For many Christian readers in the twenty-first century, this ritual meal may not mean much. For the ancient Israelites, however, sharing a meal had powerful symbolic connotations, expressing covenant unity and a shared life. For them, to share a meal meant that all at the table were like family. In fact, meals were so important that two enemies making a peace treaty could solidify their new covenant relationship by eating a meal together. The former enemies would leave the table as covenant partners, even using the language of family to describe their new committed friendship. Even adversaries become brothers through covenant meals (see Gn 18:26-33).

3. In light of this background, what does this tell us about Israel sharing a meal with God? What does this mean?

Answer: When we read about the Israelite leaders having a meal in God's presence, we should see this as a pivotal moment in Israel's relationship with the Lord. This ritual meal symbolizes the intimate covenant relationship God is now forging with His people. Because sharing a meal signifies covenant union, the fact that the Israelite leaders eat this covenant meal in God's presence symbolizes the profound relationship God forges with His people. Through this ritual, they have become sealed as God's covenant family.

Please read aloud: This ritual at Sinai is not only important for understanding a foundational moment in Israel's relationship with God; it also tells us a lot about how we Christians are to worship the Lord today, for the specifics of this ritual at Mount Sinai reflect a divine pattern for worship. Already in the time of Moses, God establishes the basic structure for worship that He desires to be used for the rest of time. Note how, at Sinai, there is found a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of Sacrifice. Moses first proclaims the Word of God and then leads the people in sacrifice, a blood ritual, and a communion meal.

4. Where do you see this same structure of worship today? How does it fit with what Catholics do at Mass?

Answer: The Mass we celebrate today starts with the Liturgy of the Word and ends with a Eucharistic liturgy of sacrifice, in which Christ's sacrifice on the cross is made present (see Catechism, nos. 1362-67). We share Christ's blood and partake of His crucified and resurrected body in a communion meal. Therefore, when Catholics worship God in the Mass, they are not following the practices invented merely by some human pastor, minister, or theologian; they are participating in the divine order of worship that Jesus established at the Last Supper in the Eucharist—a liturgical structure that God foreshadowed long before, going all the way back to what He revealed at Sinai in the time of Moses.

Please read aloud: The Israelites' newly affirmed faithfulness at Sinai is about to be tested by the absence of their anointed leader. At the end of the covenant meal, the glory-cloud manifesting God's presence descends on Mount Sinai and Moses enters its midst, where he remains for forty days and forty nights, unseen by the Israelites at the base of the mountain (Ex 24:18).

Once again, God wants to see what is in their hearts. Let's see how the Israelites fare:

Read Exodus 32:1-9

5. What do the people do in this passage? Why is this so serious?

Answer: Alone in the desert wilderness and uncertain about what happened to Moses, the people give in to their fears and their hearts turn back toward Egypt as they fall into idolatry. Although they speak about dedicating a feast to the Lord (Ex 32:5), they idolatrously worship the image of a golden bull calf, reminiscent of the Egyptian

god Apis (Ex 32:4). As was typical of many pagan rituals, Israel's worship of the golden calf included debauchery, drunkenness, and sexual immorality, which is reflected by the Hebrew idiom, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (Ex 32:6).

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6. At least in some respects, the sin at Sinai even appears graver than Adam's sin. Why might this be?

Answer: The people fall into idolatry after they have witnessed God's great love for them, liberating them from slavery with many miracles in Egypt and drawing them into intimate covenant union with Him on Sinai. Moreover, the people just accepted the First Commandment about not having other gods before Yahweh, solemnly promising to keep it (Ex 24:7). To turn to idolatry after all this is a complete rejection of the God who so lovingly rescued them and the God to whom they just vowed their loyalty.

Please read aloud: The radical rupture in Israel's relationship with Yahweh is reflected in God's words to Moses on top of Sinai, informing him of the idolatry at the base of the mountain:

Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned

aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32:7-8)

7. Did you notice how God refers to the people in this passage? What does this slight change tell us about Israel's relationship with God?

Answer: Notice how God seems to disown the people, no longer speaking of Israel as His own but as the people whom Moses brought out of Egypt ("your people, whom you brought up out of the land"). Yet God's words merely reflect Israel's tragic choice that day: God offered the people covenant friendship, but they reject Him and instead worship the golden calf. In doing so, they put themselves outside of the covenant union God extended to them. God's language, therefore, simply reflects Israel's decision not to live in covenant with Yahweh.

8. Have you ever experienced feeling separated from God? Or have you observed how your sins lead you away from him? Explain your experience.

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

9. Like the Israelites, sometimes we too might have moments of deep closeness to God. At other times, we might turn away from him. How is God calling us to respond in each of these situations?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.