

**Prayer (Exodus 32:9-16)**  
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We've been walking through the 7 Rhythms that are the foundation of the 10-Week Journey here at Sonrise. We finished Reflection on Scripture, and have moved to Prayer. So today, for our central passage, we will be looking at a pretty wild interaction between Moses and God. If you'd like to join me, I'll be in Exodus chapter 32.

As you flip there, I want to tell you a story. When I was probably around 8 years old, I lived in a neighborhood in Aloha. There was a guy that lived to the left of us. His name was Guy. Guy was such a good guy. He would bring us over candy for Halloween and was always nice to us when he saw us around the neighborhood. Guy had this beautiful red car, and from my memory, it looked like a sports car.

Now we had a rule when it came to Guy's house. My dad told me not to play around in Guy's yard. But I had a bunch of neighborhood friends who would play cops and robbers and soldiers and zombies with me. So, there was one day, I remember it as a Summer day, when I ran to duck behind Guy's car. And I had in my hand a toy gun, that I raised to aim up over the car. Well, as I raised the pistol up, I felt it scratch the side of Guy's car. So, I told my dad what happened, and my dad looked mortified. He went over to inspect the damage, and then had a conversation with Guy. I vaguely remember watching my dad have the conversation with Guy, and feeling the butterflies in my stomach. My dad came back, went in to talk with my mom, and then came to me with the verdict. My dad and Guy agreed upon \$500 to get the car fixed. My mind started racing. How was I going to raise enough money to pay for that? But, my parents, decided that they would pay for almost all the damage. My dad couldn't get a new TV that year because of my disobedience. But even though I didn't listen and ignored his rules, he still stood up for me and interceded on my behalf.

I often think back on that day as a day where I saw the love my parents had for me in action. I didn't deserve them standing by my side, but stand by my side they did. And I think this is an apt analogy for the heartbeat of God. This story with my dad reminded me of the story we are going to sit in for today.

Again we will be in Exodus 32, but first, let me give you a little context. At this point, the Israelites have made it out of Egypt, led by Moses into the wilderness after God had ravaged their captors, the Egyptians, with plagues of all sorts. They have crossed the Red Sea, and seen Pharaoh's armies washed away by it. They have been fed with bread from the skies. They have seen water come from a rock when they were thirsty. They came to the Mount of God, Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb, which is the place where God first encountered Moses in the Burning Bush, and the Israelites underwent rituals to keep themselves pure so that they could be sworn in as God's people. God descended onto the mountain in a pillar of smoke and fire, and there was an earthquake under the mountain. God boomed His voice out to them, and told them the first ten commandments that would act as a foundation of the agreement, of the covenant, between Him

and them. Moses goes up on the mountain to get the written code of the laws from God, and to speak with God about the way He wants them to structure their society, taking notes about festivals, and the economy, and the places for worship, and justice for criminals, etc. Moses comes down again to dedicate the people to God, the people say over and over again that they will obey God's commands. Yahweh would be Israel's God, and Israel would be Yahweh's people. Moses goes back up the Mountain to get the official the terms and conditions you might say, written on stone tablets, and he stays up there at the top of this mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. And he leaves Aaron, his brother, in charge.

So while Moses is up there, he deliberates further with God about the details having to do with the new Israelite society, and how it all will work. Then we get eight chapters straight of God speaking with Moses about all these little details, and then, the list of to-do's suddenly stops. And this is where Chapter 32 begins. Let's read.

*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. (Ex. 32:1a)*

*As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Ex. 32:1b)*

So, Moses has been gone for a little over a month, and the people start getting antsy. They feel like they have no way to encounter the Divine. So they look to Aaron to solve the problem, to give them a tangible thing that could help them encounter the Divine. The irony is that they are at the base of the mountain, and God is manifesting just on top of it. They are nearer to God than any other people group on earth, but here they are saying, "I just feel like we need something to worship."

It goes on,

*So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. (Ex. 32:2-4a)*

There is a particular insult here. The golden rings that they are wearing they likely received the night before they left Egypt. Exodus 11 tells us that the Egyptians so feared the Israelites because of the plagues, that God told the Israelites to ask their Egyptian neighbors for articles of gold and silver, and when the Israelites asked, the Egyptians just handed them over. So this is probably jewelry that they got by God's mighty hand. It's like they are melting down the engagement ring that God gave them. And not only are they melting it down, but they're crafting it into an idol. It continues,

*And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*

*When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. (32:4b-6)*

Aaron has not only broken the first commandment by making an idol, but has also attributed to this idol the victory and freedom that the True God gave them. Yikes. There is a song by Colter Wall called 'Kate McCannon', and it is a grueling dark folk song about a man who is in prison for shooting his wife. The song begins with the man describing how he met his wife for the first time at a creek, and the song ends with these words,

"O, and one day I come home to find,  
my darling angel's not inside.  
So I made for the creek,  
where she and I did meet,  
and found her with some other lover..."

And after these lines, the song starts to pick up intensity and speed, almost trying to create in you the feeling of the man's rage boiling hotter and hotter. This feels like a good analogy for what Aaron and the people just did with the golden calf. And so here is how God responds.

*And the Lord said to Moses, "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 that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped 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)*

Now, it's been commented before that it sort of sounds here like God is releasing His claim on the people. He no longer calls them "my people," but rather, "your people." It also could be that in His omniscience, God is using the very words that the people are using down at the bottom of the Mountain. Remember, earlier they referred to Moses as "the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt." Regardless, God responds as if He is almost letting go of Israel. And then listen to what He says next,

*And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 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." (Ex. 32:9-10)*

The Lord's long fuse has run out it seems. He's ready to start over. And He wants to use Moses as the material for His shiny new people, once He has wiped out the old. He tells Moses to leave Him alone, so that He can incinerate the Israelites. And shockingly, Moses doesn't listen. Verse 11:

*But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. (Ex. 32:11-12)*

Just a quick note, the word for "turn" here in Hebrew is the same word that is can be used to say, "repent." That strikes me as a really crazy word to use when speaking to God... It goes on, *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"* And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Ex. 32:13-14)

I want to sit with you in this moment, because I think this moment holds some real substance for us. Moses has sat on the Mountain listening for forty days. We have no record of him even replying to any of the list of things that God gives him to do. But after 40 silent days, He watches God's patience run out. And Moses decides this is the moment he needs to break his silence. How easy would it have been for Moses to hear God say, "Leave me alone," and to obey, to just stand aside, to watch God obliterate the stiff-necked Israelites. And it's not like God is being unjust here, either. The people are genuinely corrupt and unfaithful. They're an adulterous generation. And nowhere in his response does Moses try to justify the Israelites. He doesn't try to paint them in a better light. Moses does something even more risky. He reminds God of who God is. He basically tells God not to be forgetful. Imagine standing in the piercing heat of the Divine presence, and deciding to correct the One that made you. It's like Moses is walking naked into a nuclear explosion. He's talking back to the One who could undo his very existence. Moses has some major guts here.

Now, if this feels like a tension point to you, if you feel like there are some boundaries being crossed here, you're not alone. The longer I reflected on this passage, the more absurd it came across to me. I think the questions that this passage cause us to ask almost demand an answer. And so I want to pose an interpretation of what's going on that might answer some of those questions, and in a way that I think honors the intentions of the Scriptures. But, first, I want to lay out an important definition.

This moment is a perfect example of what is called 'intercession'. I know that's not a word we hear very often in our day to day, but it basically means to pray for someone else, bringing to God's throne the concerns, the case, the burdens, of someone else. Think of my dad going to negotiate on my behalf with Guy. That's a good analogy for intercession. Now this is a particularly crazy example of intercession, because of how forward Moses is with God. Rarely does someone speak as confidently to God as Moses does here. But I want to probe this example of intercession, because I think throughout Scripture, we see intercession is actually a sort of pipeline into the heart of God. In fact, this is my Big Idea for today: **Intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

But we'll get into that more in a minute.

Another strange turn the passage takes, as if the story isn't wild enough already, is that once Moses has spoken up and said his piece, God backs down. Why did God back down when Moses piped up? Here's this mere mortal telling the all-knowing, all powerful God to repent, to turn from anger back to the Person He said He'd be. Doesn't that seem a little insulting? If God were like one of us, He might feel the urge to defend Himself, and maybe even to punish Moses for such a demeaning response. But God says nothing back. All it says is that the Lord relented. On its face, it seems Moses gets God to change His mind. What a comical, unbelievable moment!

I think we get a seedling of God's character in this story, an idea that will continue to grow and grow as the Scriptures unfold. God has a heart for intercessors, for those who are willing to plead the case of another. And, I see two parts to this. I think the first part of God's response is meant to affirm the faith of the person that calls God to love and mercy. It's almost like He is pleased to see someone that truly believes He is faithful and just. But then for the second part, I think God loves to see the heart of a person who loves their neighbor enough to pray for them. So, God sees on one hand, in a person like Moses, faith in God's character, but also love for the neighbor. The cross-over between that faith and that love is the act of intercession, of standing up in prayer for the needs and well-being of one's neighbor. And something about intercession gets right to the heart of God.

Think about a time in your own life when someone has spoken out on your behalf. Maybe you got in trouble at school and your parents came and stuck up for you when speaking with your teacher? Maybe you were being gossiped about and one of your friends called out the rumors and kept them from spreading? Maybe you had to go to court and one of the witnesses or even maybe the judge defended you to your accuser? There's something deeply comforting in knowing that someone has your back, like me standing at my window watching my dad talk to Guy on my behalf. And at the same time, it takes real courage to be the one that stands up for your neighbor.

Here we see that God honors a heart that intercedes. Moses feels the threat that is looming over his people and he can't stay silent. He leverages, and I might even say, risks his position as God's anointed in order to advocate for them. And God responds by bending, softening, and relenting. In other words, God listens. What a marvelous thing that our God listens. He doesn't need to listen. He could just bulldoze everyone. But here, He listens. He listens, because **intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

Ok, now I'm going to make a big jump in history, so hang in there with me. I truly believe that all the Scriptures, if we look close enough, are meant to point to Jesus. So there's a way in which this passage then is not really about Moses. I think the shadow of intercession we see here in Moses is fully realized in Jesus. And I think if we explore how Jesus is, you could say, the perfect version of Moses, it will also make sense of why God relents and forgives the Israelites. There are many moments we could point to of Jesus Himself being an intercessor for someone in need, like Moses is in this story. In fact, you might say that every healing, every exorcism, every

teaching came from the same deep well of love that Moses was pulling from. In each of the stories, Jesus is leveraging His position as the Son of God to bring down, out of the abundance of God's power, the crucial medicine that humanity so desperately needed. Again and again He looks to the Father for the sake of the people, just like Moses here speaks to God for the sake of the people. And maybe the most moving example of this comes in Luke 23, as Jesus is being crucified,

*And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (23:33-34)*

Jesus' burning heart for the brokenness of the world doesn't freeze over when He is in the middle of anguish. He doesn't harden His heart, even when the ones who need Him most become His enemies. Instead we see Jesus stand up in love for them at the peak of their hatred for Him. Jesus could have reacted in that moment with retaliation, with anger. He could have levied a curse on everyone there that day. But, even as they take pleasure in brutalizing and torturing Him, Jesus stands in their corner, advocating for them. If you're new to the Church, one thing that's crucial for you to know here is that we don't just think Jesus was a perfect man. We believe Jesus was God become man. As Jesus said, those who have seen Him have seen the Father. So, I think what we can learn from this is that God loves the heart of an intercessor, because deep down at His core, God Himself is an intercessor. In Jesus, God shows us that, like Moses, He too will stand up for the sake of sinners, that He too will intercede for the broken. In fact, in Jesus we learn that **intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

Could it be that the reason that God threatened Israel in front of Moses was never really to destroy Israel? Could it be that God was really just probing Moses to see if He had the same heart? Could God have been testing Moses to see if Moses would be an intercessor? Because if Moses had cheered on Israel's destruction, or even stayed quiet and just let it happen, Moses would not be like the Living God revealed in Jesus Christ. Moses would not have shown the interceding love of God burning in him. Moses would, in a sense, have turned his back on the spirit of intercession that we see on the Cross. But as we read, if indeed God was testing Moses, Moses passes the test. Moses displays Jesus' heart. He shows that he too carries the mark of intercession in his heart. And once God sees that Moses shares His heart, He listens. And again, He listens, because **intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

We hear that same loving heartbeat between Mount Sinai and Mount Calvary. But unlike Moses, Jesus' intercession was not for only a moment. Jesus wasn't finished interceding even after all He suffered. The author of Hebrews tells us in chapter 7 that,

*"Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." (7:25)*

Jesus is still interceding for the World, right now. He sits at this very moment at the right hand of the Father, looking at you with that burning love, pleading with the Father that you might be made whole. In fact, your whole salvation hinges on His willingness to pray for you. Just like

the Israelites could never have inherited the promised land alone, you cannot inherit eternal life alone. You're broken, and Jesus sees your brokenness. He sees you dancing around the golden calves in your life, even after all He has done for you, and Jesus still advocates for you. The life of God is painted for us in the Person of Jesus, and what we find is that we worship a God who always lives to pray for us. We find that **intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

We see this again in that, not only is Jesus praying for us, but His Spirit, which dwells in us, is also interceding for us. Romans 8 says,

*"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." (8:26)*

We are new to the art of prayer, like infants learning to walk. And that's where the Spirit of Jesus comes in, who is an Olympic gold-medalist in prayer, teaching us to pray alongside Jesus. His Spirit lives in us, shaping our prayers at the deepest levels, creating in us the same prayer that Jesus has always been offering to the Father. John Calvin once wrote that when we pray, it's as if we pray with Christ's mouth. The words of the crucified One are laid onto our tongue by His Spirit of Love. Our heart starts to beat with His.

Sooner or later, the loving concern that God has for us becomes our loving concern for one another. As we are continually shaped into the image of Christ, our hope is that His heart will become our heart, His pain will become our pain, and His longing will become our longing. A person living with the Spirit of Jesus will feel burdened, moved to pray for their neighbor. Whether their neighbor is a disciple or an unbeliever, a brother or a foreigner, a king or an orphan, a friend or an enemy, the Spirit of Jesus will grip them and compel them to pray. A follower of Jesus will not go alone to the Throne of Grace. They will not carry only their own concerns to God. They will also lay at the feet of the Father the well-being of their fellow man. This is why the Christian does not pray, "My Father in Heaven," but "Our Father in Heaven," not "Give me this day my daily bread," but "give us this day our daily bread." Whenever we pray, we stand as a member of a household, of the family of faith. We take to Him not only our hurts and needs but also the hurts and needs of our fellow man.

Alright, so now I'll show you my cards. As I was preparing today's message, I was convicted. I fall far short of being a consistent intercessor. I often forget to bring even crucial prayers to the throne when I am praying. It's so easy to stay self-absorbed in our prayer lives. And maybe you suffer from the same temptation, the same complacency and passivity when it comes to interceding. Maybe you think that God is going to do whatever He wants anyways, so why bother praying? And sometimes seeing the fruit of your prayers takes a lot longer than we are willing to wait. I know I give up hope, or I just get tired of praying the same prayer again and again. There is a story, though, that inspires me. It comes from the early years of the Church. There was once a woman named Monica, a faithful believer, who had a son named Aurelius. Aurelius was quite the opposite of a faithful believer. He was out living the party life, he knocked up a girl, he was chasing all the philosophies of the day. And so, Monica, broken-hearted Monica, prayed for Aurelius often. She prayed for him without giving up for 17 long years, begging God

to open his eyes. And after all that time, God listened to Monica's prayers, and not only converted her son, Aurelius, who is also known as Augustine, but made him into perhaps one of the top ten greatest theologians and pastors who has ever lived. I have a picture of Augustine and Monica on my wall in my office to remind me to be patient and persistent in my interceding, whether its for a family member, or a student, or a friend, or even an enemy. In the picture, Augustine is holding a scroll that has written on it, "You are near even to those who go farthest from you." That is the hope we have, even when we are praying for the people dancing around golden calves, even when we are praying for those who are crucifying Jesus in their hearts. Our hope is that our prayers are heard by the God whose heartbeat is intercession.

So in light of this passage, I want to take more seriously the work of intercession. So here is my plan. I have here in my pocket a smart phone. And on that smart phone, I am keeping a list of people I need to pray for. And each day, I have a set number of people that I am committing to praying for. Now, its easy to get caught up in ideals, so if you want to do something like this too, start small. Choose an amount of people that you could manage to pray for each day, no matter what life throws at you. And let that begin to stir in your heart a passion for the work of intercession. Refuse to end the day without having prayed for your people. Then, once it becomes second-nature, then consider taking on even more people per day.

Now some of you in this room are veterans when it comes to intercession. Maybe you've got lists in your home or even in your pocket of the people you are taking to God in prayer each day. And I don't feel confident enough to instruct you, so instead, I'll challenge you in a different way. For the prayer warriors in the room, would you consider committing to praying for the people in our Church, and asking God to light a fire in our heart? Would you pray for us, not only that our needs would be met, but that we would become fellow veterans with you? I do believe that God honors the concern and care you have for us, and as a pastor, I would love to see my passion and the passion of this church ignite for intercession. Would you pray for me and for the rest of our Church?

And also, for those of you who are newer to the Church, still considering whether this lifestyle of discipleship is really for you, or maybe to those of you who have been out of the rhythms for a while and who are just now getting back into them, I encourage you to join into a community that can walk with you as you explore or relearn some of these practices. If prayer feels new or rusty to you, having a group of friends on the journey around you to keep you going when life gets crowded, or you feel discouraged or exhausted is crucial. And even if you're super skeptical, maybe you'll learn something from watching the people in your group explore it. It can't hurt to meet a few new people and make a few new friends. We have lots of groups available, and a super short term one, only a little over two months long, called the 10-Week Journey, that you could sign up for out in the lobby.

In this story, we see that God takes very seriously the work of an intercessor. And that's because intercession is taking up with our own hands what is happening all the time in the inner life of God. When we pray, we speak with Jesus' mouth to the Father, transformed through His Spirit. To be an intercessor is to be invited into the Triune God's work. The work of intercession is



God's work, placed into our hands, like a carpenter teaching an apprentice how to use one of his tools. So as a Church, we have to remember and take seriously the work of intercession, because **intercession is the heartbeat of God.**

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### Life Level Application

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1. How do you feel reading **Exodus 32:7-16**? What questions about God does it raise for you?
2. Have you ever found yourself praying for someone in your life out of sheer concern for them?
3. What does Jesus' prayer in **Luke 23:33-34** teach us about God?
4. What do you think it means that the Spirit intercedes for us with unutterable groans (Romans 8:26)?
5. Is there someone in your life you feel led to pray for on a more consistent basis?
6. How does it feel to know that Jesus is interceding even now?