

How Revival Comes

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Preacher: Rev. Andrew Ong

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This morning's scripture lesson comes from the Old Testament. The book of Exodus, chapter 32, verse 7 to 14, 19, 30 to 35, and then chapter 33, verse 1 to 6. A reading from the book of Exodus. Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 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.

[1 : 09] I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are a stiff-necked people. 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. 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?

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.

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.

Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disasters he had threatened. Verse 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.

[2 : 22] 30 to 35, the next day Moses said to the people, you have committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

So Moses went back to the Lord and said, oh, what a great sin these people have committed. They have made themselves gods of gold. But now please forgive their sin.

But if not, then blot me out of the book you have written. The Lord replied to Moses, whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you.

However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin. And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

Chapter 33. Then the Lord said to Moses, leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants.

[3 : 23] I will send an angel before you to drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.

When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn, and no one put on any ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, tell the Israelites, you are a stiff-necked people.

If I were to go with you, even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do with you. So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

The grass withers, and the flowers fall. Thanks for that scripture reading, Amy.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew, and I'm one of the pastors here. Will you join me in prayer? Our Father, I come before you asking that you would make much of my little, that we would hear the words that you have for us this morning, O God, and that you would stir up within us a passion for your presence, the conviction that you are what we most need.

[4 : 44] You are the only thing, the only one that we need, O God. Would you convince us of that truth? And would you convince us of that truth in such a way that it changes the way we live, the way we love, and the way that we inhabit this broken world?

So preach your word through me, we pray. Fill this place with your spirit. In the name of Jesus, amen. All right, well, that was a long passage, so thank you, Amy, for making it through. And I'm sure it probably stirs up a lot of questions for a lot of us. Maybe you have questions about, you know, how does prayer affect the sovereign plan of God? How does this God who is unchanging change his mind and relent after this prayer?

Maybe you have questions about, like, why did so many people have to suffer this plague? Was it really that big of a deal? Maybe you have questions about this whole notion of getting blotted out of this book that God has.

A lot of crazy, weird, and hard to talk about stuff in here. And so I want to direct you to Pastor Jonathan to answer those questions. I'm not going to be focusing on any of those things today.

[5 : 56] But again, our elders and our pastors, we'd be happy to talk to you about all those things. But as many of you know, we have been focusing on revival in this fall season of Christ Church. That is the word that's been on our lead pastor's heart coming back from sabbatical revival.

And the prayer that's been on all of our hearts is revive us. And we've been talking about that for the past five weeks. And we've been preaching through it. And we're going to continue preaching it in this fall season.

Now, another thing you want to know about Christ Church is that every fall, we try to preach specifically, intentionally through something from the Old Testament. Because we want to make sure that our church family has a balanced and steady diet from God's word.

So where we are now, starting today, in the next five weeks, is we're going to be in the book of Exodus. Particularly chapter 32 to 34. I actually want to encourage you to open up those pew Bibles in front of you.

It's page 70. It's this famous episode, right, that we might all be familiar with. It's the famous episode of the golden calf. And then the events that follow after that. And we want to focus on this because we want to camp out here on this episode of Israel's history for these next five weeks.

[7 : 05] Because this isn't just an embarrassing episode of Israel's first great national rebellion. But it continues into an encouraging episode of Israel's first great national revival.

So for these next five weeks, we are going to be studying this great corporate revival in redemptive history. And the big idea today is this. Every revival begins with the proper pining for and pursuit of the presence of God.

Every revival begins with the proper pining for and pursuit of the presence of God. So I want to ask us this morning, not merely do we want revival, but do we pine for the presence of God?

Do we passionately pursue the presence of God? Now, I understand that for many of us, our honest answer could very well be no.

Neither. I do not pine for the presence of God. I do not pursue the presence of God. Maybe you're here and you wish you pined for the presence of God, but you're not there.

[8 : 09] You're not even sure that you can believe in God. Maybe you can identify with that British agnostic writer, Julian Barnes. He once famously wrote, I don't believe in God, but I miss him.

Or maybe you're here and you think you believe in God. You can call yourself a Christian, a believer, but you've long lost your appetite for the presence of God. Maybe you're not even sure you ever had a taste for it.

Maybe you're not exactly even bothered that you've lost your appetite for it either. Maybe God to you is like that, you know, that jar in the back of your fridge that hasn't been opened in ages, that you just hardly notice now.

You never crave and you just kind of keep back there because you're more occupied with other things. You don't want to take the time to clear your fridge, reach for it, and figure out if you want to keep it or toss it.

But, you know, I'd like to suggest that we're actually all pining for the presence of God in a sense. The scriptures teach that all of us are inherently religious beings and that even if we're not actively pursuing the presence of God, and even if we don't sense a pining for the presence of God in our hearts in one sense, we are all probably pining for it more than we think.

[9 : 20] Or maybe I should say it this way, even if you're not pining for the presence of God, I guarantee you that you are pining for something that only the presence of God was meant to fulfill and satisfy.

And in fact, I'd argue that your very pining actually points to the reality of God's presence, which you probably miss more than you know. So even if you don't particularly care to have God be present with you, you feel like life is going just fine without him, for however long or for however short that may last, may I just ask you to consider this.

What if there is a God who wants more for you than just the enjoyment of his creation? What if? What if there's a creator who wants to give you all of himself?

And in every possible blessing that flows out of union and communion with the living God, might it be that if we don't pine for something transcendent and eternal and ultimate, if all we ever pine for is the creature and never the creator, then might it be that our desires will only ever prove far too small?

And even if we should one day get all that we ever thought that we wanted, will it not actually prove inadequate and even destructive? The late American writer Cynthia Heimel, who as far as I can tell was not a Christian, she shared an example of this as she lived in New York and lived among the celebrities.

[10 : 46] She knew Barbra Streisand, she knew Bruce Willis, and she knew Sylvester Stallone. And she wrote this, when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you, and of course we know he doesn't do that, but she's saying if he did, he'd grant you your deepest wish and then giggle merrily when you suddenly realized you wanted to kill yourself.

Barbara, Bruce, and Sylvester, were fervently more than any of us wanted fame. If I can be famous, people will adore me. Life will be a breeze. All my dreams will come true. The night each of them became famous, they wanted to shriek with relief.

Finally, now they were adored, invincible, magic. The morning after the night, each of them became famous. They wanted to take an overdose. All their fantasies had been realized, yet the reality was still the same.

If they were miserable before, they were twice as miserable now, because that giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment, and happiness happened, and nothing changed.

They were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable. See, nothing else is going to do. Nothing else is going to cut it, not even making it to the top of the ladder.

[12 : 04] In fact, it could make things worse. Those who pine for anything other than the presence of God only pine for problems that nothing but the presence of God can address.

No matter who you are, you pine and you pursue because you have a deeper pining for the presence of God. Now that we all pine and pursue the presence of God doesn't mean it's all good and it's only a matter of time before we enter into glory.

There is a wrong way to pine for and to pursue the presence of God and then there is a right way to pursue it. And our text today shows us both. It shows us both here in Exodus chapter 32.

So let's start with the wrong way and the wrong way is called idolatry. Idolatry. You know, I think for a lot of us, when we hear this story, even if we're not Christians, we think of this episode in Exodus chapter 32 about the golden calf worship.

We just think it's so ridiculous, right? If you're a Christian, you're like, dude, that's an obvious no-no. Of course you don't worship idols, duh. And certainly not a golden calf crafted by human hands.

[13 : 05] And even if you are not a Christian, you probably know that much about the Christian faith, right? Idol worship, not recommended, right? And then as a modern Western person, you're probably also thinking, how superstitious, right?

How ridiculous these primitive people are, how ridiculous they were to bow down to this inanimate object. But if we take the time to really understand these Hebrews in their own context, we begin to find that they aren't too different from any of us after all.

You know, it wasn't as if they just woke up one morning and said, hey, I got a great idea. Let's rebel against the maker of heaven and earth, the one who delivered us from Egypt. Let's do the one thing that will most anger him, most grieve him.

Let's make a golden calf and bow down to it, this pile of our jewelry, and let's worship that instead of Yahweh. Sounds like a good idea, right? No, no one woke up saying that.

First of all, they weren't idiots, all right? These ancient people didn't actually think that this golden calf figure was a divine being. If you want to open up the Bibles in front of you, page 70, chapter 32, verse four, Aaron says, these are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt.

[14:18] See, what they understood this golden calf to be was not a new God to worship instead of Yahweh, but a new mediator to Yahweh. See, if you look at verse one of chapter 32 in your pew Bibles, what prompts this golden calf incident?

It says, when the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain. So you have to understand, you see, it's been 40 days now since they last saw their leader Moses.

They're very mediator to God. Like this guy who stood up to Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world, stood up to Pharaoh for them, the one who parted the Red Sea and led them out of slavery in Egypt, the one who spoke to God and quail and manna came down from heaven, the one who struck a rock and quenched their thirst.

So imagine you are freed from slavery, but you are also in the middle of the wilderness and far from the only home that you've ever known in Egypt. You are vulnerable and insecure and you don't know where you're going or how long it's going to take to get there or even if you will make it.

And the miracle man who's been bringing you along this whole time, this miracle man who mediated to you the very presence and the very power of God, he's been gone for a month and 10 days.

[15:32] And you're stuck at the foot of some mountain, it's 40 days in counting with no mediator in sight and thus 40 days in the seeming absence of the presence of God. You can begin to sympathize now, right, with their concerns.

This golden calf incident is not some random outright rebellion. The golden calf is a fearful people's attempt to secure their greatest need. But lest we give Israel too much credit, it is a foolish and futile attempt, right?

You see, by making this calf, they were trying to do two things. In the ancient Near East, such calf figures were often seen as pedestals for the gods to sit upon or stand upon, like the mercy seat of Israel's Ark of the Covenant.

Also, calves were a symbol of strength and fertility and prosperity. So they were trying to establish, what, a meeting place with God. And they were indicating what they truly pined for.

Yes, they wanted, in one sense, Yahweh. They wanted his presence. But they were more ultimately seeking his benefits. Benefits over the benefactor.

[16:39] The goods over God. And this was all so ironic because, see, Pastor Dave Lomas in San Francisco, he helpfully talks about this Mount Sinai event as a kind of marriage ceremony.

Like, that's what God brought them out of Egypt to do. He wanted to ratify his covenant union with these people. So basically what's happening was that while God was with Moses on the mountain, laying out his covenant plan like an excited groom, just laying out his vision for a thriving life with his beloved bride, detailing exactly how he desired to be present with her, giving Moses intricate details about the tabernacle and about the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat upon the Ark of the Covenant where he would meet with his people, details about the most sacred place where he planned to cleave to them in the deepest covenantal intimacy.

At the same time, the people were forming a mob and taking it upon themselves to make their own haphazard alternative to the Ark, to try to force the presence of God into their own presence, to harness his power and submission to their own power.

And when we put it like this, can you see that Exodus 32 isn't just some story of wayward Hebrews, but it's a mirror. It's a mirror of all of us, scrambling in fear and foolishness to identify or even craft a mediator, someone or something to secure and ensure God's presence with us in the promised land of our dreams.

You see, like Israel, we are all grasping for the presence of God, doing whatever it takes, willing to try even the most haphazard methods of apprehending him, because deep down, we all know that we can't live without the presence of God.

[18 : 20] Maybe we don't take our jewelry and forge a golden calf to bow down to, but we're all looking for things to add to our lives to harness God's power and his presence.

Maybe it's certain religious institutions or pastors or leaders or certain spiritual experiences or exercises. If I just join that right church, follow that right religious leader, if I just go to that retreat, if I just obey hard enough, follow these rituals more faithfully, maybe then, maybe then, right, God will be present with me, even owe me his presence.

And even for those of us who aren't religious, we have our own ways of pining and pursuing. We might not have the same language, we might have a different language of longing, but at the end of the day, we're not so unlike idolatrous Israel.

In pursuit of sex, in pursuit of money, power, fame, and our attempts to add more and more to our lives to achieve our greatest ambitions, to satisfy our deepest appetites, and to win the approval of others.

Are we not actually just like the Israelites adding the golden calf to their lives? So the way of the golden calf, the way of idolatry, is the wrong way to pine for and pursue God.

[19 : 33] Because while it is a pursuit of God in one sense, it's at the same time not a pining nor a pursuit of God at all. It's the prodigal son saying to the father, I want my inheritance from you, but I don't want you, father.

And then ending up where? In the pigsty. The way of the golden calf, of constructing our own mediators to secure for us the blessings of God will only ever lead to further harm to ourselves and further offense against God.

So now the question is, what is the proper way to pine for and to pursue the presence of God? What does that look like? Well, it's actually really simple. Do we desire God?

Do we desire God? And not as a means to an end, but as the end in itself. Do we believe that the chief end of humankind is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever?

I probably share this quote at least once a year, but I really think we all need to reckon with this question from Pastor John Piper, who loves to ask, if you could have heaven with no sickness, with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven if Christ were not there?

[20 : 55] Piper says, people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven, it is a way to get people to God.

See, if God is not our chief end, if God with us is not our gospel, the best possible news that we can conceive of, then I'm sorry, but we are not properly pining for nor pursuing the presence of God, and revival will never be on its way.

But if we do desire God, and God alone, well then that's the stuff that revivals are made of. And that's what we see happening here also in Exodus chapter 33.

Look at verse one. Revival began when Israel finally began to desire God for God. All right, after sending a plague upon Israel for her idolatry, God says to Moses, go up and lead your people to the land I promised them.

He's saying, I'm still going to keep that promise to you and to your forefathers, and you can count on military success over your enemies, and you can count on economic prosperity in this land flowing with milk and honey, but, verse three, I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.

[22 : 14] And honestly, this could have sounded like a pretty good deal, right? Like, yo, we can have the promised land, we can have milk and honey without this angry plague sending God. Not bad, right? I mean, isn't this the dream, the promised land with no strings attached?

It's the Western secular dream. It's the kingdom without the king, right? All the blessings of the kingdom without the domineering authority of the king, the best possible scenario, right? But Israel didn't see it that way.

Israel didn't see it that way. When God said in verse three, Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.

Verse four. When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn, and no one put on any ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, Tell the Israelites, You are a stiff-necked

people.

If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do with you. So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

[23 : 17] Wow, right? What just happened here? What just happened here? Why would they turn down this awesome deal, the kingdom, without the king? Why would they even want this kind of a God to go with them, this angry, plague-sending God, this God who seems so incompatible with them, that if he were to be with them, even for a moment, he might destroy them?

What was so distressing to them about not having this God, about not having the presence of God? What led them to mourn and to strip off their ornaments and to linger in the distant hope of God somehow changing his mind and gracing them with his presence after all?

You know, honestly, I couldn't figure that out for a long time this week. I puzzled over that this week. What led them to this kind of repentance? Like, why did Israel have such a penitent change of heart all of a sudden?

I mean, at first, even when Moses comes down from the mountain, right, and he breaks the tablets right in front of them and gives them a visual image of what has just happened, they've broken God's law, they've broken God's heart.

And even when Moses grinds up that calf and makes them drink it and then sanctions the faithful Levites to put about 3,000 Hebrew idolaters to the sword, a whole day goes by and the people still have not repented.

[24 : 31] And then Moses, the next day, tells them how great of a sin they've committed. And at the end of chapter 32, Moses goes and he tries to atone for this unrepentant people's sins, but God refuses and sends a plague.

And then all of a sudden, here though, they are now filled with godly sorrow. What happened from chapter 32 to chapter 33? How is it now that they're stripping in repentance as an entire nation? What happened? Well, I like to think that at least two things happened that brought about this great national repentance. Two wake-up calls that transitioned them from this first great national rebellion into the first great national revival.

And those two things, I believe, were the plague and Moses' rejected atonement. I think that getting struck with a plague in the same way that Egypt did woke Israel up to the reality that the only thing that distinguishes us from anyone else is not our culture, it's not our bloodline, it's not who we come from, but whether or not we are with or without God.

The plague was their wake-up call, that the only thing that distinguished them as a holy people was the presence of the one true holy God. Perhaps it reminded them that even though they had survived the tenth plague in Egypt, the angel of death, the angel of death still did pass over them as well, and the only difference between them and the Egyptians was the blood of a lamb.

[26 : 00] And this brings us to the rejected atonement of Moses. Again, for Israel, Moses was the man. Like this guy, this guy, it was a guy that God listened to, whose requests led God to even change his mind.

In chapter 32, when God wants to destroy all of Israel and just make a nation out of Moses instead, Moses says, no God, finish what you started amongst them, do not let the Egyptians gloat over them, remember your promises, and God, listen to him, God relented.

Look at verse 30. The next day, Moses said to the people, you have committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

So Moses went back to the Lord and said, oh, what a great sin these people have committed. They have made themselves gods of gold, but now please forgive their sin, but if not, then blot me out. Look, Moses is even willing to sacrifice himself in order that these people's sins might be atoned for, but God would not and could not accept such an atonement even from Moses.

[27 : 02] And so between this rejection of Moses' atonement and the plague, I think Israel was finally cut to the quick, realizing that neither their status as Abraham's descendants, nor even the mediation of mighty Moses could save them from their heinous sin of idolatry.

They had no other recourse than to throw themselves at the mercy of God and to strip off their ornaments. Now, this wasn't just some Hail Mary on their part.

They were waiting to see what God would do. And as ominous and distressing as his word sounded, from another perspective, God was actually also declining to be present with them because there was a real sense in which he didn't want to destroy them.

Did you catch that? Did you catch that in his words? Even though it seems like it's all anger and fury, God here is not just saying, I don't want to be with you because I'm angry at you. He's saying, I don't want to be with you for your own sake.

I don't want you to be destroyed and so I will not go with you. This isn't some temperamental, egotistical God, but a God who is faced with the challenge of wanting to be with his beloved people and yet wanting for the sinful people to not be destroyed.

[28 : 15] And I think that the people began to understand this. What happened after Moses' rejected atonement and the plague was that they realized the paradox of the Christian faith, that they had absolutely nothing before God and yet that he alone was their greatest need.

They became poor in spirit. It all came together. What a foolish thing to build a golden calf. We don't need to add to ourselves to reach God. We need to strip ourselves bare so that there's nothing in between us and God.

See, they are finally beginning to grasp that God plus nothing equals everything and that blessed are the poor in spirit. That indeed, everything should be counted as lost in comparison to knowing God and that if we can't have God, it's not worth going into the promised land.

In fact, the promised land can't even truly be the promised land if God is not there, if his presence is not there. And this is God's word to us today that revival always begins with a pure and proper pining for the presence of God and God alone.

A longing, a hunger, the acknowledgement of something missing and gone terribly wrong. Yes, revival culminates in gladness and joy, but it starts with mourning and sorrow.

[29 : 40] It culminates in fullness and abundance, but it starts with a deficit. It starts with a lack. Revival presupposes that there is something that needs to be revived and restored.

Revival presupposes that something unconscious needs to be awoken and resuscitated, that something dead needs to be resurrected and made alive and that only God can do anything about that.

Revival doesn't come when we seek to ascend to God through our own golden calves or other creaturely mediators. No, revival comes when we are brought low and empty-handed, realizing, how great our sin, how grave the consequences, and how impossible it seems to be restored to the presence of God.

And yet, the good news of the gospel is that revival isn't impossible. The presence of God with us isn't impossible. The good news of the gospel is that God with us is more than possible.

It's already here. Emmanuel, God with us in Jesus Christ. better than the golden calf, better even than the ark of the covenant itself. Jesus is the presence of God who pined for and pursued us, who came near sinful us.

[30 : 53] The temple of God he is. He's the temple of God who came down from heaven to dwell amongst us in the flesh. He's the one true mediator between God and mankind. And better than Aaron who furthered the people's sin.

And better than the Levites who let the people die for their own sins. And even better than Moses who was willing to sacrifice himself for them but could never atone for the sins of Israel or the world.

Jesus, the Son of God, is the great high priest who painfully bleeds and powerfully pleads for us. Father, forgive them not for their sake but for mine.

That's what he does as our high priest. You see, in Christ, in Christ, the holy God who absolutely hates the sinful idolatry in which we are all so complicit.

He can be present with us without destroying us because he is both our perfect priest and our precious lamb. And isn't that good news?

[31 : 58] And doesn't that make you want to pine for the presence of God? What other God is like this God? What other God will give himself for us?

This high priest who prays for us, Lord, have mercy because I've paid for them. They are mine. I want them. This is the gospel.

Will you pray with me? Amen. Let's pray.

Amen. Let's pray. .