

You Might be Surprised

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[0:00] It's up to chapter 32 today. Chapter 32. I will be reading the first part of the chapter. You can turn to it in your pew Bibles there or follow along on the screen.

Maybe you saw when you came in the image of the golden calf there on the screen, and that is where we're going today.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 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. Aaron answered them, take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing. Bring them to me.

So all the people took off their earrings, brought them to Aaron. He took what they had handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.

[1:27] Then they said, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.

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.

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, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

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, that I may destroy them, that I will make you into a great nation.

[2:37] 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?

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 disaster he had threatened.

The word of the Lord. So some movies are just really predictable, right?

[3:50] I mean, everything's fine, then everything falls apart, and then an unlikely hero comes along, and he almost dies.

He meets a girl. He saves the day. They get married. He lives happily ever after. Other movies aren't so predictable.

A movie I watched a while back was about a guy who was a door-to-door appliance salesman, and then one day he walks past this recording studio, and he's inspired, and he forms a band, and against all odds, he becomes a big star.

But he doesn't live happily ever after. The whole second half of the movie is this crazy mix of success and failure, good and bad choices.

It's kind of a mess, actually. There's infidelity and addiction and this downward spiral, and then things get better, but not completely. Is he a good guy?

[4:55] Is he a bad guy? It's hard to tell. Is he a hero or not? It's hard to say. Does the movie have a happy ending? Well, kind of.

Sort of. It's a mix. Full of surprises. And part of the reason why it's like that is it's based on a true story.

The movie's called Walk the Line. It's about the life of Johnny Cash. It's real life, and real life isn't predictable. Real life tends to be full of surprises.

And what we have here in the book of Exodus is real life, and it's full of surprises. If you think the Bible is made up, I'd encourage you to spend some time looking at what's actually in the Bible. It's kind of messy. You couldn't make this stuff up if you tried. You also wouldn't make this stuff up. If you invented a religion and wrote a holy book, you wouldn't write it like this.

[5:56] In your book, I'm pretty certain your God would be a lot cleaner and clearer and nicer. The whole story would probably be a lot more predictable.

It would be a lot more predictable and a lot easier to tell the good guys from the bad guys. If you or I wrote a holy book, I'm thinking it would have much more of a fairy tale feel to it and just kind of really nice and the whole thing just really inspiring.

That's not what we have in the Bible. What we have in the Bible and God's Word is actually kind of messy, and it's never been accused of being predictable, at least not by anyone who's actually read it.

The Bible is full of surprises. The book of Exodus in particular is full of surprises, and those surprises, they're important for us to see. Those surprises, they tell us some important things about how life really is and how life really goes.

Those surprises tell us important things about human nature and about the real God. Not some fairy tale version of God, but the real one.

[7:11] So we're going to spend some time this morning in the text this morning just kind of going through and especially looking at the surprises that we find here.

And surprise number one is the calf itself. I mean, what were they thinking? What were they thinking? Just a few months before this, God had saved them.

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, he parted the Red Sea and drowned their enemy. He set them free, and then he knocked their sandals off at Sinai. He revealed himself to them.

He showed up in a special way and then revealed his will to them. They saw his glory and experienced something of his glory, and then they got some good instruction there, their good shepherd giving them guidance and instruction, and that instruction starts with the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments, they start, actually the first two of them have to do with idolatry, right?

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol. And then right after the commandments, God comes back to the topic of idolatry again in verse 23 of Exodus 20.

[8:25] Do not make any gods to be alongside me. Do not make for yourselves gods of silver, gods of gold. And then there's some more instruction that happens, and then the people all respond, we will do everything the Lord has said.

Everything the Lord has said, we'll do it. Yes. And then what happens? They build a golden calf. They go ahead and make an idol. So Moses was up on the mountain.

He was the bearer of God's will, this representative of God. He was up on the mountain, kind of out of sight, out of mind. And after he'd been gone for a while, they make an idol, and they start worshiping the thing, and they are worshiping this golden calf, and there's a bit of a question of whether they were worshiping the calf itself, or that maybe they kind of thought they were sort of worshiping God through this calf somehow.

We don't really know, but either way, it's wrong. If it was more breaking the first commandment or more breaking the second commandment, it was wrong, and it was some of both, and all told, it was quite surprising, given the context, how messed up and surprising this was.

After all God did for them, after his clear instructions to them, how could they? It's a surprise that, well, tells us something about human nature.

[9:58] It really tells us something about ourselves, something sobering. It's not something we like to hear about or think about, but it's there, and it's the truth. The word that's used here is the word corrupt.

God says to Moses, verse 7, go down because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

Now, it's actually, I find it a little bit humorous how God says this, right? It's almost like mom talking to dad or dad talking to mom, and it's like, you know what your kid did?

And that's kind of, you know, God here, you know, your people, Moses, the people you brought out of Egypt, look what they're doing, look what they're up to, and that's a little bit humorous, but it's also just really sad.

These redeemed people, you would have thought that their redemption would have had more of an effect. Surprise number one shows us how deep sin goes, the reality of sin, of sin, and what sin does in us.

[11:09] God created us good, right? God created us with a pure love for him, a pure love for one another. That's how we were created, but sin corrupts that, and we end up doing what Israel did.

We forget how we got where we are. We're slow to change. We ignore our God. We ignore his commands to us, his clear instructions, his warnings, his helpful warnings.

We just kind of let him slide by. That's what our sin tends to do. For the people of Israel, Moses, right, he was up on that mountain.

He was still up on that mountain. Gone for a while. For us, Jesus, he's still up in heaven.

Sometimes kind of out of sight, out of mind a little bit, and so we turn to other gods, and we turn to other powers, and other things that are kind of closer at hand.

We make idols. We worship things that we can see, and touch, and feel. We give ourselves over to what makes us feel good in the moment. And that's kind of what our sinful nature does.

[12:24] And it's surprising. After all God's done for us, and his clear warnings to us about falling for these false gods, still we do it. The Bible tells us about this golden calf episode, how it all went down out there in the wilderness, in order to sober us up a little bit, and help us to see what sin will do, and where our sinful nature will take us.

Surprise number two is God's response. As I mentioned earlier in the service, I mentioned that image on the front cover of my first Bible, with Jesus holding the little lamb, surrounded by little children, and it's a good image.

But it can't be our only image of God. The Bible has lots of them, and some of them, honestly, are kind of surprising, like the presentation of God that we find here in Exodus 32.

The God that we find here doesn't really fit into one of our nice boxes. He's not gently petting little lambs. His little lambs are being pretty ornery, and not very lamb-like, and he's calling them on, and he's raging against their sin.

He says they're stiff-necked. And then he says this. He says to Moses, It really seems like he's had it with his people.

[14:03] And he'd sworn to their forefathers that he'd be their God forever. Now it seems he'd like to be done with them. And he's thinking he'll start over again with Moses, kind of like he did with Noah.

Start over. But isn't this the God whose love endures forever? And did he not promise to not break covenant with his people?

He did. And so this comes as a bit of a surprise. So what is this surprise telling us? Well, for one thing, anyways, it's telling us that we do not serve a teddy bear God who's soft.

He's no pushover. He's the good shepherd, but he's also holy. Holy. Holy. And to say he's holy is to say that we can't put him in a box.

And it's to say as sinners, we can't stand in his presence. Without an intervention, our fate is sealed, his holy anger, it burns against our sin, it burns against our idolatry.

[15:12] He's a jealous God. Without an intervention, sinners are goners. That's the reality. The thing is, he does provide intervention. And that's the good news.

But we only really get to know and understand how good the good news is if we see how bad things are to start with. That God's wrath is real.

In a very real way, our God's had it. His wrath is real. But his atonement for sin is just as real.

And that atonement for sin, that's what has the last word. Rather than destroying us as sinners, God atones for us. That day, with the golden calf, God didn't end up destroying the Israelites.

There was punishment. But he didn't destroy them. He didn't walk away. He didn't walk away from them. He provided an intervention. And actually, what he did that day, it pointed ahead to the cross.

[16:18] It's amazing, really. Our God, he works both sides of the equation. That's what I want you to see. And really, that's the only way it could work.

It's the only way things work out for us. Our God, he works both sides of the equation, both judging wrong and making it right. Both wrath against sin and evil and payment for sin.

The abolishing of evil. He does it all. His wrath against sin is real. But it's nothing compared to the reality of his love and the reality of the cross.

Let's back up for a moment. Let's back up. There's another surprise here. So, Moses, he speaks out. Moses has something to say.

So, God's wrath is burning. The divine Lord of the universe is angry. And there's this mere mortal named Moses who, for some reason, thinks it's a good idea and a good time to approach him, to go talk to him.

[17:31] And for some reason, he's got the audacity to sort of question God, even try and talk God down, talk him out of what he was thinking of doing.

It's surprising. God's talked of destroying the people and their sin. And then in verse 11, it says, But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God.

O Lord, he said, why should your anger burn against your people? Turn from your fierce anger. Relent, Lord. Do not bring the disaster on your people. Remember your servants.

This is covenant language. 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.

So maybe, Moses had the gumption to do this and to go to God because he'd just been with God on the mountain, had that quality time with the Lord, the special time with the Lord, was maybe feeling really close to God.

[18:37] That doesn't fully explain it, though. There's something really extraordinary happening here. Moses, he wouldn't just do this in his own power.

Zooming out, what we see here is Moses, at this moment, has become a type of Christ and God's spirit has come on him and come into him and is using him to stand in the gap, to stand in the breach, to stand up for sinners.

So Aaron would become the high priest in that high priestly role, but right now, Moses, in a special way, is in that role as mediator.

He's the intercessor. And I want you to see, too, how really it was God himself who put Moses in that position. This priestly representative there, interceding on behalf of the people facing God's wrath, boldly asking for mercy, calling on our covenant God to remember, to relent, to remember his covenant and faithfulness.

It was all a part of God's plan and God's work and God's purpose and it all pointed ahead to Jesus. What God did through Moses, it was kind of shocking.

[19:56] It was kind of surprising. What he did through Jesus was, too. And that's kind of the point. Now to the final surprise.

So there in the last verse that we read, verse 14, it tells us what happened after Moses stepped in and stood up on behalf of the people. He makes a plea and then it says this.

It says, Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. God changed his mind? If God did a 180 here and changed his mind, that would be a big deal because that just doesn't happen.

The Bible says clearly that God doesn't change. That's part of what it means to be God and not human. He doesn't make mistakes. He doesn't change. The I am who I am is who he is.

He's immutable, unchangeable. It almost sounds though like God changed his mind. So what's going on?

[21:07] Well, the word relent here is a big clue. Author Philip Reichen, he puts it this way, he explains this way, he says, When the Bible says the Lord relented, this does not imply that God changed his mind.

God gives clear indications that he was planning on mercy all along. This is why he got Moses involved in the first place. It was so his people could be forgiven.

In the words of the psalmist, and we've got to read scripture with scripture, right? Therefore, he said he would destroy them had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

So Moses was not changing God's plans, he was carrying them out. This moment was such a big deal because it shows us, it reveals to us God's plan to save the world.

It doesn't show us a God who flip-flops, it's actually quite the opposite. It shows us his resolve. The reality is sin is a big problem. The human race turning on its creator, rebelling against God, it's a big problem, and God's wrath burns, burns, it must.

[22 : 23] Where there's evil, his wrath burns, and that's a good thing. It's a good thing that it does. We need evil to be judged and destroyed and done away with. The problem is we ourselves get sucked in by temptation, and we side with evil, and that was the case with those folks there at the base of the mountain, with the Israelites worshipping that unholy cow.

They were in danger. They brought themselves under judgment. The threat was real, their situation dire, but at that very moment, when things were at their worst, when God's wrath was burning the hottest, he sent Moses down.

He sent Moses to the people. Moses was up there on the mountain, and what does God say? Go down, Moses. We've got to cut our conversation short.

Go down, Moses. You've got to get down there. My people have become corrupt. Go down. God sent Moses down, and he said to Moses, these are your people who you led out of Egypt.

Why does he say that? He's wanting Moses to identify with them, to be with them, identify with them, and take responsibility for them. He's wanting Moses to intercede on their behalf.

[23 : 46] It was all a part of his plan, and it all fit into his bigger plan, the ultimate plan. God so loved the world that he sent down his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. The triune God of the universe, he saw how corrupt the world had become, and how corrupt humanity had become, and father turned to son and said, go down, Jesus, go down.

And Jesus did. He came, he came to be with us, he identified with us in the deepest way possible, and he represented us, and shouldered our sin, and he went to the father on our behalf, and he went to the cross on our behalf, and stood in the gap for us.

God doesn't change his mind. What he does is he relents from allowing the destruction we deserve. What he does is he refrains from leaving us in our evil ways. He intervenes. He sends down a mediator, a savior. So it's good that we see all these surprises in the Bible, and it's good that we slow down and notice and really take in what they're saying to us.

[25 : 24] Often the biggest truths are contained in the biggest surprises. And I just really appreciate too, all the twists and turns and surprises in scripture just serve to confirm the reality of scripture.

That it's real life. And it really happened. And our God really does what it says he does for us too, for us today as well.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. God, we stand in awe of you and we thank you for the gift of your word, Lord, a light for our path and a lamp unto our feet.

Not everything in life is all neat and tidy. Not everything in your word is all neat and tidy. Not everything in us is all neat and tidy. And we marvel at how you receive us in Christ and work in and through all of it.

Lord, we surrender our all to you. Have thine own way, Lord. That's our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen. may