

Moses' Prayer

HN 27/11/05pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 9, I John 5

Study Text: Deuteronomy 9:25 – 29

Sing Psalms: 34:1 – 9; 34:10 – 16; 139:16 – 18; 34:17 – 19

The people of God sinned against the Lord. They made an idol in blatant disobedience to the command the Lord had given them only days before. They broke the covenant the Lord made with them and therefore were subject to the covenant curse. The Lord said to Moses *let me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven, and I will make of you a new nation* (9:14). Was that it? Was that the final word? The Lord had decided and nothing could be done?

Moses did not see things this way. Moses, the man whom *the Lord spoke to face to face as a man speaks to a friend* (Exodus 33:11) turned to the Lord in prayer. He knew that the Lord listens to the cries of his people – the Lord told him so at the burning bush (Exodus 3:7, 9). Moses went up and pleaded with the Lord not to destroy these rebellious and stiff necked people who had broken the covenant. He knew their sin, he hated their sin, yet he pleaded with the Lord of their behalf. This is a great prayer of intercession.

Here in Deuteronomy Moses recalls this incident and his prayer on that occasion, over forty years before. The people must not forget how they provoked the Lord and how they could justly have been destroyed. Moses never forgot how he prayed to the Lord at that time – it was serious prayer. He has already referred to that prayer in this chapter (9:18). In the passage before us today he jumps back to that prayer and gives us the details (9:25 – 29).

Posture

Moses *fell down before the Lord*. He prostrated himself before the Lord for forty days and forty nights. Now that is serious prayer. Not only that but he fasted for this time – *I neither ate bread nor drank water* (9:18). He did this because the Lord had said he would destroy these sinners. Moses would not let the weakness of the flesh distract him from his prayer.

It was not the posture *per se* that mattered – it was that this posture demonstrated reverence and humility in his heart. God looks upon the heart. *Moses was more humble than any other man* (Numbers 12:3) and this humility was demonstrated in his approach to the Lord. With all his being, with complete and utter devotion he came before the Lord in prayer. This was serious prayer, this was fervent prayer. And the *fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much* (James 5:16). James takes Elijah as his example but he could well have taken Moses.

Points

What did Moses say as he prayed? He carefully records what he said. He did not come with words that someone else had given him. He did not come babbling in a language he could not understand. The prayer of Moses came from his heart and mind. His prayer was based on his

knowledge of God and with this knowledge he confidently approached the Lord with his petition.

It is interesting that the more a person knows about God, and the closer they walk with the Lord, the more time they spend in prayer. Beware of saying to yourself ‘Oh everything is fine – I don’t really have anything to pray about’. You may think that that sinner down the road has a great need to pray, not me– but you would be wrong.

Moses’ petition was not for himself but for the people he was leading. They were a rebellious people who more than once had threatened to kill him. Moses was horrified by their sin and rebuked them sharply. Yet he pleaded with the Lord not to destroy them. He loved these rebellious sinners. Jesus said *love your enemies...pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44).

You redeemed these people. Moses’ first point was these were the covenant people of God. They were the people upon whom he had set his love. They were the people he brought out of Egypt with great power. They were his special treasure, holy to the Lord. The Lord had redeemed these people and he had great plans for them; they were his inheritance. If the Lord were to destroy them now, all that he had done would be rendered pointless. He would have to start all over again with a new people.

Moses knew that the Lord would be justified in destroying them. They had sinned and broken the covenant. But he asked the Lord to forgive them or to ‘lift up’ their sin (Exodus 32:32). He even offered for his own name to be blotted out of God’s book – such was the depth of Moses love for these people. The Lord was pleased. He was moved by the intercession of Moses.

Remember your promises. The Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12). This promise had ramifications extending right through to Jesus. What would become of this promise if these descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were destroyed?

Consider your glory. Moses’ third point, and a powerful one at that, was to consider the glory of the Lord. Moses realized that the Lord’s reputation in the eyes of the world was at stake. He appealed to the Lord not to let his own name be dishonoured by the Egyptians.

With a great display of his power before the world the Lord brought these people out of bondage. He punished the Egyptians and destroyed their king who dared to oppose the God of Israel. If the Lord now destroyed the very people whom he had rescued, what would the heathen say? They would say he was not able to bring them into the land as he said he would. They would say he led them into the desert in order to kill them.

Moses did not want the Egyptians to have reason to mock the Lord his God. Let God maintain his glory before the Egyptians, and all the world, by forgiving these people and bringing them into their own land as he had promised. Are you concerned for the glory of God? Do your prayers and your life reflect such a concern?

Moses’ prayer of intercession was effective. *The Lord relented from the harm which he said he would do to his people* (Exodus 32:14). It was now over forty years later when Moses was recalling this prayer for the instruction of the people. There was no need to say that his prayer

had been effective – it was obvious. God’s glory had been maintained and his people were about to take possession of the land of Canaan according to the promise.

Postscript

Some, indeed many, find it difficult to reconcile the doctrine God’s providence, of His ‘foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass’ (Shorter Catechism – Question 7), with the doctrine of His immanence, the Lord relenting of what he intended to do. They have a problem with the whole idea of intercessory prayer, prayer that potentially leads to God changing his mind. They cannot accept that God in His sovereignty knows all things (omniscient) and has predetermined all things.

Arminians have always had a problem understanding how man can have a free will when God had predetermined all things. In the last decade another theology known as Open Theism has arisen. Not only does it question predestination in salvation but says that God does not know the future; the future open. Its proponents use this prayer of Moses and the fact that God relented, to try and show that God’s purposes are not immutable or set in concrete as it were, for He does change his mind.

The central tenet of this theology is that the future is unknowable or that God chooses not to know the future. So the future is open. It is beyond the realms of time – it has not happened so cannot be known. They claim not to be denying the omniscience of God, for God knows all that is knowable. Yet they admit that God can make mistakes. He takes risks and adapts to the free will choices made by man. They see this as the only way intercessory prayer can work. ‘God in His sovereign freedom decided to make some of His actions contingent upon our requests and actions’ (CT2001).

You may recognize this as a resurgence of the teaching of Socinus at the time of the Reformation. This man did not like the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as taught by Calvin – and modern proponents similarly dislike the absolute nature of Calvin’s teaching and what is Reformed theology.

Rather than bringing God down and imposing limitations on His knowledge, let us exalt the Lord and hold with the full authority of Scripture that He *knows all things* (I John 3:20) and that His sovereign will and purpose does not change (Numbers 23:19). We cannot comprehend His divine plan apart from what He chooses to reveal to us – for God’s ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9). *Who has known the mind of the Lord?* (Romans 11:34).

When God does reveal things to us He does so in a manner which we can understand – He does so in human categories. Hence in the Scriptures we find anthropomorphisms (and in this case anthropopathisms) – human features attributed to God who is Spirit.

Let us humble ourselves before the Lord as Moses did. From Moses perspective the Lord relented or changed His mind for He did not know, nor did any other man, what was the sovereign will of the infinite and eternal God. The Lord was pleased with Moses prayer. It was a prayer after God’s own heart. God relented of the judgment He was about to bring upon His people for He is a gracious, longsuffering and forgiving God.

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