

AARON—A GOOD MAN WHO DID A BAD THING

Presented by

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As most of you know who are listening to me present this sermon, on Sunday afternoons for the past several months those of us who attend here at Mill Creek have been involved in a class titled “All about the Bible.” Our class began in Genesis 1 with a study about the creation of the Universe, and is continuing with an in-depth examination of each successive book in the Bible.

Along the way, we have met some intriguing individuals. For example, in Genesis 4 we were introduced to a man by the name of Cain who became envious of his brother Abel—and murdered him in cold blood for no other reason than the fact that Abel had chosen to obey God. Yet just two chapters later, in Genesis 6, we got to meet Noah—a man who, according to Genesis 6:9, was “perfect in his generations,” and whose obedience to God (by building an ark through which humanity would be saved from a worldwide flood) resulted in our being here today. In Genesis 12 we discovered a man by the name of Abraham—whom God commanded to leave his home in order to go to an unknown land where God promised to make his descendants as numerous as “the stars of the heavens and the sand that is on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). Yet in Exodus 5 we witnessed pharaoh, the king of Egypt and the most powerful man on Earth at the time, turn millions of Abraham’s descendants into slaves—and then, when the Lord God of Israel threatened to bring the pharaoh’s kingdom to its knees, boastfully scream in defiance, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go!” (Exodus 5:2).

I cannot speak for you, but speaking for myself, I have to admit that as we studied each of these individuals, and the turbulent events that occurred in their lives, there were times when both the people and the circumstances seemed **so real** that I felt almost like I was right there with them—experiencing the same things they were hearing, seeing, and feeling. One instance that immediately comes to mind was when, as the Bible puts it, God

“came down upon Mount Sinai, and there were thunderings and lightnings, and the mountain was completely in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and a thick cloud came upon the mountain, and smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly so that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16-20).

As that passage was read to those of us in the class, followed by the echo of God’s majestic voice as He said to the Israelites, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:1), it actually was kind of scary. As I listened, I could not help but wonder how the Israelites must have felt on that occasion as God did something He had never done before, and would never do again: **He spoke from heaven to an entire nation all at once!**

But there is another event that was even scarier—and that will be forever etched into my mind. Shortly after God spoke those words, He commanded Moses to go up on Mount Sinai so He could give him the Ten Commandments written on two tablets of stone, and so He also could give Moses all sorts of other laws for the Israelites. Forty days later, Moses descended the mountain carrying in his arms those two unbelievably precious stone tablets—“written by the finger of God” Himself, Exodus 31:18 tells us.

And what did Moses find when he got to the base of Mount Sinai? In what must truly rank as one of the saddest passages in the entire Bible, Exodus 32:1-35 gives us the answer to that question. During Moses’ absence, the Israelites had come to make a request of Moses’ brother, Aaron, who, according to Exodus 19:24, God earlier had permitted to come up on Mount Sinai with Moses, and whom God later would appoint as Israel’s first high priest. The people said to Aaron, “Make us gods that shall go before us; but for this Moses, who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him!” (Exodus 32:1). And what was Aaron’s response to this ill-conceived, ungodly request on the part of his Israelite brethren?

What Aaron **should** have said was this: “**No, I will not do this!**—because God Himself commanded us, ‘You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth, and you shall not bow down to them nor serve them’” (Exodus 20:3-4). Yet here is what Aaron actually **did** say: “Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (Exodus 32:2). The Israelites did as Aaron commanded. And, as Exodus 32:4 goes on to tell us, “Aaron received the gold from their hands, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then the people said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, which brought you out of the land of Egypt!’”

What happened next is truly heart breaking. Exodus 32:6 says that the Israelites “rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings [to the golden calf]; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” Less than a month and a half after the entire Israelite nation had heard the thundering voice of God scream from Mount Sinai, “**You shall have no other gods before Me!**,” those very same Israelites begged for an idol to worship as “another god.” And Aaron gave in to their wicked, fleshly desires.

When Moses came down from the top of Mount Sinai where he had met with God, what did he see? Exodus 32:19,25 tells us: “As Moses came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing.... **And Moses saw that the people were naked, for Aaron had not restrained them.**” The people not only were worshipping a pagan idol as their god, but also were engaging in gross immorality that had affected the entire nation! Exodus 32:19-20 records Moses’ reaction: “Moses’ anger became hot, **and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.** Then he took the calf that the people had

made, burned it in the fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the children of Israel drink it.” Moses then said to the Levites, “Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor” (Exodus 32:27). As Exodus 32:28 goes on to tell us, “**About three thousand men of the people fell that day.**” But that is not **all** that happened. Exodus 32:35 goes on to add, “So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.”

And what was Aaron’s response when Moses turned asked him, “What did the people do to you that caused you to bring so great a sin upon them?” (Exodus 32:21). Aaron’s pitiful, shamefaced response was, “The people gave me their gold, and I cast it into the fire, **and this calf came out**” (Exodus 32:23-24)—as if Moses (or anyone else) would ever believe such a ridiculous story!

Aaron was undoubtedly a “good man.” After all, he was half of the team whom God had sent to deliver His message to pharaoh to let His people go. Aaron was the man whom Moses left in charge while he went to the top of Mount Sinai to speak with God and receive His laws for the Israelites. And Aaron was the man who later would be chosen as the first high priest of Israel. But on this particular occasion, a **good** man did a **bad** thing! And because of Aaron’s sin, more than 3,000 of the Israelites died a cruel and completely unnecessary death.

Many years later, the apostle Paul would write in the New Testament, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). While Aaron may have been a “good man,” he nevertheless sinned—hurt Israel badly. King Solomon wrote many years later in Ecclesiastes 9:18, “One sinner destroys much good!” Aaron discovered that eternal truth the hard way. As God told Moses in Exodus 32:34, “When the day comes for punishment, I will punish the people for their sin.” And God did exactly that—all because a **good man** did a **bad thing**.

Now I have a question. As I have explained to you everything that happened to Aaron and the other Israelites who deliberately disobeyed God, did you “feel almost like you were right there with them”—experiencing the same things they were thinking, hearing, and seeing? If so, did **you** learn anything from what happened to **them**?