

Passion for People

by Scott Grant

Struck by the paradox

When I was working for my college newspaper, I covered a debate between William F. Buckley and John Kenneth Galbraith. Buckley, of course, is an economic conservative, and Galbraith is a liberal. At one point, Galbraith accused Buckley of being inconsistent in supporting low taxes and high tariffs. He expressed amazement that Buckley had taken such a stand. Buckley responded, "You mean you were struck by the paradox." His quick-witted retort brought the house down.

God himself seems to us as a paradox. His attributes seemingly conflict. Consider his love and his anger. God both loves and gets angry. These two attributes, however, are not contradictory, as we shall see in Exodus 32. And they produce in Moses, once he comprehends the Lord's love for people and his anger toward sin, an amazing passion for people. We, too, as we comprehend the depth of both the Lord's love for people and anger toward sin, will be similarly moved.

In Exodus 25 to 31, the prescription for the tabernacle is given, calling Israel to be a worshiping community. In Exodus 35 to 40, the construction of the tabernacle is recorded. Between these two sections is Exodus 32 to 34, where the people rebel against the Lord and where Moses intercedes for them. The hinge between Exodus 25 to 31 and Exodus 32 to 35 is 31:18. There it is recorded that the Lord gave Moses the two stone tablets on which he had written what are commonly referred to as the 10 commandments. Moses, then, is ready to return to the people with the 10 commandments, the law and the instructions for the tabernacle. But while he has been away, the people have shown that they want nothing to do with the Lord or his commandments.

The people's sin (32:1-6)

Moses has been on the mountain a long time. In all, he spent 40 days there meeting with the Lord (24:18). The people become impatient in Moses' absence, and they begin doubting both he and the Lord. They can't see what Moses is doing or what the Lord is doing. They feel that they need something more substantive to hold onto, something more present. So they ask Aaron to make them a god, a god who is there, a god who will lead them. The spokesman for the Lord hasn't been around for a while. So the people reject the Lord, because they don't think he's doing anything for them.

Is that true? Moses has been gone a long time, yes. But what has he been doing on the mountain? He's been receiving instructions from the Lord for the people -- instructions that, if followed, will result in the people's well-being. The Lord is preparing for them one of his greatest blessings -- the tabernacle, which will call the people to worship. Far from being inactive, the Lord is exercising extreme care for his people. But the people can't see this care. All they "saw" was that Moses had been gone a long time (32:1). They could have appealed to the Lord's amazing faithfulness to them thus far and fought through this crisis to arrive at the belief that the Lord was indeed caring for them and would continue to do so, but they gave in to the impulse against faith and for something more apparently tangible -- something they could see. It's the same thing we do, too, of course. We give up fighting for faith far too soon and give into something more tangible; we give in to idolatry, and we thereby miss some of the Lord's greatest gifts.

In response to the people's demands, Aaron instructs them to tear off the gold rings in their ears, and he makes a golden calf. The Lord had given the people the gold in the first place when they plundered Egypt (12:35), and he had plans to use gold in the construction of the tabernacle (25:2). The people, gifted by the Lord for service to the Lord, instead use those gifts to build another god -- to reject the Lord. We too use our God-given

resources, whether it be money or talents or spiritual gifts, in misguided efforts to serve our own needs, or our own perception of our needs, instead of worshiping the Lord. The tragedy is that worshiping the Lord is ultimately what meets our needs.

What Moses will have on his hands when he returns is a full-scale mess. Where the people are is where sin is. And where sin is, there's a mess. There's confusion. There is disorder. There are things we haven't the least idea how to deal with. There are unsolvable problems. There's unbearable heartache.

What do we do about the mess?

The Lord's love (32:7-14)

The Lord's response to the mess below is to tell Moses to "go down at once." How sublime it must have been for Moses on the mountain. Moses entered into the center of the Lord's being (24:18) and spent 40 days in intimate friendship with the Lord, hearing his intimate thoughts. One just might want to stay there forever. Yet the Lord tells Moses to descend into the mess -- the messiness of people and the messiness of sin. There are times when I literally climb a hill or a mountain for the sake of getting above the mess and meeting the Lord. These times are essential for me. Sometimes, far from the messy crowd, waves of peace envelope me. The mountain, though providing an essential reprieve from the mess, also motivates us to return to the mess. For if we're on the mountain, interacting with the Lord, we are sensing his heart -- and his heart is for people. His heart is where the mess is. So Moses returns, and so must we. Our chief example of this, of course, is our Lord, who left heaven to descend into the messiness of earth.

In speaking with Moses, the Lord identifies the Israelites as "your" people -- Moses' people. Aren't they the Lord's people? Now that they're misbehaving, is the Lord disowning them and foisting them on Moses? Of course not. By calling them "your people," the Lord is inviting Moses to care for the people, to identify with them.

But there is a problem. The people have "corrupted" themselves, and they have "quickly turned aside" from the Lord. What's more, the Lord has seen that they are an "obstinate" people, or, literally, "people of stiff neck." They are like domestic animals that will not respond to direction. Even when disciplined, they still go their own way.

Because of this, the Lord is angry. How do we understand the Lord's anger? Consider what he has done for Israel. He went to phenomenal lengths to rescue her from slavery in Egypt to bring her into relationship with himself. He has led her, loved her, protected her. She is the apple of his eye, the jewel of his love. But now she has rejected him, turned her back on his love, turned her back on what she was created for. As she rejects relationship with the Lord, the purpose of her creation and redemption, she destroys herself. The Lord is furious that his precious creation is intent on destroying herself. Therefore, he is angry.

He announces to Moses his intention to express his anger by destroying the people and starting over with Moses: "Now then let me alone that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." This is a most curious announcement. The Lord seems to be asking Moses' permission to destroy the people. Why does the Lord, the almighty God, need to tell anyone to "let me alone" in order to do something? Clearly, the Lord is inviting Moses' intervention.

Before we consider Moses' response, let's consider how else he could have responded. The destruction of the people and the creation of a new nation from the loins of Moses could have been appealing to Moses on at least two counts. First, these people had let him down more than once. They grumbled against his leadership, fought with him and were even on the verge of killing him (17:4). We can see how it would be easy for Moses to want to be through with the whole batch of them. Second, in proposing that Moses begin a new and great nation, the Lord is offering Moses the opportunity to become the new Abraham (Genesis 12:2). He is offering Moses "greatness." Who would want to turn down greatness?

Moses would. He doesn't consider the Lord's offer for a micro-second. Instead, he immediately launches into a passionate plea for the Lord to spare the people. What gives? Earlier Moses cried out, "What shall I do to this

people?" (17:4) But he has just spent 40 days with the Lord, and he has seen the Lord's heart. He's been receiving the Lord's instructions for the people. He's been absorbing God's word, and God's word tells of God's love. God's word has changed him.

In speaking with the Lord, Moses calls the Israelites "your people." Whose people are they, anyway? Are they Moses', or are they the Lord's? The Lord and Moses almost seem like a couple arguing over who is responsible for a wayward son: "He's your son!" "No, he's your son!" But this is not the case. Moses knows they are the Lord's people. He's just spent 40 days hearing about the Lord's love for his people. He doesn't even argue the case. They are the Lord's people, he knows they are the Lord's people, and he knows the Lord knows they are the Lord's people. And the Lord's love for his people has rubbed off on Moses. He loves them, too. Thus, they really are Moses' people, too, and thus he makes his appeal.

He offers the Lord three reasons why the people should be spared. He appeals to the Lord's love, reputation and faithfulness. First, he tells the Lord that he rescued the people "from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand." Moses knows that the Lord went to great lengths to rescue the people, and those great lengths are evidence of great love. Moses, in so many words, tells the Lord, "How can you destroy the people you love so much?" Second, Moses says the Egyptians, when they hear of the people's demise, will think of the Lord as an evil, capricious god -- a god just like one of their own. Moses is jealous for the name of the Lord, for his reputation. Third, Moses evokes the heritage of the people -- Abraham, Isaac, Israel and all the Lord's promises to their descendants. Moses bets everything on what he knows about the Lord -- his love, his name, his faithfulness.

Certainly, the Lord could be loving, jealous for his name and faithful in a way other than what Moses prayed for, but the narrative leads us to believe that what the Lord is looking for is Moses' heart. Does Moses love the people as the Lord loves the people? The answer is yes. Therefore, the Lord changes his mind. Actually, the narrator shows us that the Lord invited Moses to change his mind.

Does that mean that the Lord invites us to change his mind as well? It does. Our prayers influence God. How that squares with God's sovereignty we will never know in this lifetime. True, our prayers change us, but somehow they also influence God.

The narrator, probably Moses, concludes this section with a subtle commentary on the disposition of the people: "So the Lord changed his mind about the harm which he said he would do to his people." Whose people are they? Yes, they are the Lord's. But now it is clear that they are Moses' people, too, for he loves them as the Lord loves them.

Moses dismissed out of hand the seemingly tempting offers to be rid of these wretched people and to scale the heights of greatness. Instead, astoundingly, he pleads with the Lord to spare them. Where do we find such passion for people, even the "wretched" people who break our hearts? Where do we find such a heart? We find it in God's heart. God is passionate about people, and he wants to share his passion with us. How do we get his passion? By listening to him. Moses spent 40 days soaking in God's word. Spend time with the Lord. Go on an individual prayer retreat. Commit yourself to reading and praying through a certain section of scripture over and over again. Slow down. Let the Lord's heart seep into yours. Then the people the Lord loves will become "your" people.

In Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Raskalnikov, a murderer sentenced to time in a prison camp, is cared for by Sonia, an ex-prostitute who had befriended him. The other prisoners soon became very fond of Sonia. Raskalnikov wondered why they were all so fond of Sonia. Dostoyevsky writes: "She did not try to ingratiate herself with them. They saw her rarely, sometimes only at work when she would come for a mere moment to catch a glimpse of him. Nevertheless, everybody knew here, knew she had followed *him* here, knew how she lived and where she lived. She gave them no money, did nothing special for them. Once only, at Christmas, she brought a gift for the whole prison -- some pies and some white rolls. Nevertheless, little by little, closer and closer ties were formed between them and Sonia. She wrote their letters for them, mailing them to their kin. Relatives who came to town to visit with them left things and even money for them in Sonia's hands, on the instruction of the convicts. Wives and sweethearts knew her and went to see her. When she came to see Raskalnikov at work, or when she met a party of prisoners on their way to work, they would

all take their caps off, and they would all greet her: 'Sofia Semionovna, ma'am, you're our tender, aching mother!' So spoke these coarse, branded convicts to this tiny, skinny creature. She smiled as she greeted them, and when she smiled at them they loved it. They loved even the way she walked, and would turn around and watch her go past, and they would praise her. They even praised her for being so small; they didn't know what to praise her for next. When they were sick, they went to her for treatment."

What happened? Those prisoners became Sonia's people. Similarly, those whom the Lord cares about can become "our" people.

The Lord loves, and he wants us to share his love. But he also gets angry.

The Lord's anger (32:15-29)

Much attention is devoted in this section to "the tablets of the testimony," the stone tablets on which the Lord had written the 10 commandments. The commandments, remember, represent God's heart for his people -- his best hopes for them. Moses descends with the tablets in his hands, carrying God's word with him. It's important to know that when we descend into the messiness of people and sin and heartache and confusion, we do so with God's word.

The Lord's writing was "engraved" on the tablets. This is God's work, and it is contrasted with the people's work, the calf, which was made with a "graving tool" (32:4). While the Lord was crafting his word for his people, his people were crafting an idol in rebellion against him.

The tablets, as per the Lord's instructions to Moses, were to be placed inside the ark of the covenant, in the most holy place of the tabernacle. At the center of the tabernacle is God's word. This is in contrast with pagan temples of worship, which had idols at their center. While the Lord has been recording his word for placement in the tabernacle, the people have been making an idol, showing that they do not want the word to be the center of their lives. The rejection of God's word, of course, represents a rejection of God. And when we reject the Lord, we'll always craft some idols to take his place.

When Moses sees and hears the people's idolatrous revelry, his anger burns. Earlier, the Lord was angry, and he asked that Moses leave him alone so that his anger may "burn" (32:10). Moses questioned the Lord's anger, asking why it was burning (32:11). Now Moses' anger is burning. What has changed? Moses, after spending 40 days absorbing the word of the Lord, was deeply impacted by the Lord's love for his people -- so much so that he protested when the Lord became angry at the people's rebellious actions. It's not until he sees and hears the horror of the people's rebellion that he shares the Lord's anger. He has understood the Lord's love, but he had to see the devastating effect of sin to understand the Lord's anger. He now understands the Lord's anger, and he's angry.

He reacted with near horror at the Lord's anger earlier, because it seemed to contradict the Lord's love. Now, after seeing sin, he understands that the Lord's love and the Lord's anger are not contradictory. He understands that the Lord gets angry when his precious people embark on destructive courses of idolatry. If the Lord did not act in his anger, it would not be loving. Therefore, his anger can actually be seen as an expression of his love. He is willing to go to extreme lengths to win back his people. Thank God he gets angry.

Moses then throws the tablets from his hand, and they shatter at the foot of the mountain, symbolizing the broken relationship. The people chose another god, and the covenant is in pieces. Moses then destroys the calf, grounds it into powder, scatters the powder over the water and makes the people drink the idolatry-tainted water. This act represents the spiritual adultery that the people committed (Number 5:11-31). Moses confronts Aaron for his role in the rebellion, and Aaron offers a spineless defense of his actions. It's better to admit fault than to find fault in others' contribution to your fault.

Moses, who earlier protested against the Lord's anger, is now in favor of the Lord's plan to exercise judgment through the Levites. In giving instructions to the Levites, Moses makes it clear that they are the Lord's instructions: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel ... " The Levites kill 3,000 men. This would obviously be

a difficult thing to do -- a difficult thing to believe that the Lord endorsed. Therefore, Moses tells them that dedication to the Lord is involved in this, as is the Lord's blessing. Jesus, in instructing the disciples to confront a sinning brother in an effort to restore him, assures them that he is in their midst, that he is in favor of this process (Matthew 18:15-20).

Moses, then, understands not only the Lord's love but his anger as well. And this happened as he descended the mountain with God's word in hand, and saw and heard with his own eyes and ears the horror of how the people had turned their backs on the God of the word. When we see and hear the effects of sin -- when we perceive the horror of the effects of rejection of the Lord -- anger is an appropriate response. The Lord is angry, and we can share his anger, just as Moses did. To deny the horror, to deflect it, to soften it is to be inhuman. It is to deny one's creation in the image of God.

To be human, to share God's heart, is to become angry when we hear stories like this, as reported by Tara Burghart of the Associated Press on Jan. 6, 1995:

CHICAGO -- An unwed teen-ager who had concealed her pregnancy from her mother gave birth in her bathroom, then tossed the baby out of a second-floor window into the bitter cold, police said.

Marisol Melendez, 18, was charged Thursday with aggravated battery to a child as the infant -- named Zoe, the Greek word for life, by hospital employees -- lay in critical condition.

"The mother was very afraid of her parents," said Lt. Jose Urteaga, who described Melendez as a high school senior with good grades. "She didn't want her parents to know that she was pregnant."

Fortunately for the baby, Gloria Sosa's car wouldn't start. Sosa, who lives in the same building as the Melendez family, found the baby as she walked behind the building on her way to the store to get change for the bus.

"I heard something crying, and at first I thought it was a cat. When I got closer, I saw it was a baby," Sosa said. "My heart just went down to the pit of my stomach."

Sosa said she called 911, then wrapped the bloody, shivering baby in towels. Doctors said the baby wouldn't have survived for much longer in the 3-degree cold.

Our hearts, too, should go down to the pits of our stomachs when we hear of such a story, when we hear of the horror of sin. The question then becomes, "What do we do with our anger at sin?" Moses does something extraordinary.

Responding to the Lord (32:30-35)

Moses tells the people that they have committed "a great sin." He understands the greatness of sin -- and the Lord's anger toward it. He understands the Lord's anger. But he also understands the Lord's love. These two expressions of the Lord's heart, seemingly contradictory, crash into Moses' heart. What's he going to do with it all? How is he going to sort it out? As it turns out, despite Moses' anger, he is still for the people. In fact, after understanding the Lord's anger, he is for them in an even stronger way. He now knows that the Lord's love and anger are not contradictory but harmonious -- that love without anger is not love.

Moses understands that atonement is required for sin. Sin is no small matter -- it is responsible for all that is wrong with creation. So great a thing is sin that life is required for it. Moses knows this, and he offers the Lord his life in exchange for the people's. That's what Moses means when he asks the Lord to "please blot me out from your book which you have written." Moses offers to die in place of the people.

This is an even more passionate appeal than the one Moses made earlier on behalf of the people. Before, he asked that the Lord spare the people. Now, he offers his life in his request that the Lord spare the people. What

has changed? Moses now understands the Lord's anger at sin, and he himself has become angry. Perhaps he cannot understand the depth of sin until he understands the Lord's anger toward it. And understanding the depth of sin while retaining his understanding of love motivates him to make this extraordinary offer. Sin is so huge that it cannot be dismissed, but love is so huge that it calls for action to address the damage of sin.

Moses descends into the mess and offers up his life for the people who created the mess. The Lord denies Moses' request. Moses simply isn't qualified for the job. He is not sinless and therefore cannot offer himself up as the perfect sacrifice of atonement. Several hundred years later, One would come who was qualified. Jesus the Son of God, the spotless lamb, left heaven, descended into the mess and offered up his life for the people who created the mess -- us.

But Moses is qualified to lead the people, and the Lord tells him to do so: "But go now, lead the people where I told you." Although the Lord denies Moses' request, he sees in the request the kind of heart he's looking for in his leaders -- a heart that loves people so much that it's willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Yes, Moses has the heart of a leader -- God's heart.

Perhaps like Moses, we cannot understand the depth of sin until it angers us. When it angers us, we have some understanding of its depth. But anger without love is phenomenally destructive. The hugeness of God's love calls for a response. The hugeness of God's anger calls for an even greater response -- ultimately a response of love. If sin weren't such a big deal, we wouldn't do anything about it. But if sin is a big deal -- if poverty and heartbreak and pain and murder and abortion and adultery and child abuse and war and oppression are big deals -- and if we love, that brings us to the Lord with offers like the one Moses made. That brings us to God with the heart of God. That brings us to God with the kind of heart he's looking for. And then he'll tell us, in a manner similar to the way he told Moses, "Good. Now, go love the people."

In January of 1956, five young men -- Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully and Peter Fleming -- who were trying to reach the Huaorani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador with the gospel of Jesus Christ were speared to death by several of the people they were trying to love. Less than three years after the massacre, Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, and Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth, were living among the tribe, practicing basic medicine. Many of the Huaorani came to Christ. The circumstances of the massacre, though, remained a mystery. Although Steve Saint, Nate Saint's son, had grown up in Ecuador and spent school vacations with his aunt among the Huaorani, and though he knew who the killers were, he never inquired as to the circumstances of his father's death until recently, when he built an airstrip for the tribe.

The five men who were killed carried guns with them, primarily for protection against animals, but they had vowed to one another before God that they would not defend themselves against human attack, even in the face of death. As Steve Saint spoke with the killers, they said that initially they were haunted by one question: Why hadn't the strangers used their guns to defend themselves? This question was a major factor in the tribe's agreeing to allow Rachel Saint and Elisabeth Elliot to live with them.

The question dogged Gikita, one of the killers, "until he heard the full story of why the men wanted to make contact and about another man, Jesus, who freely allowed his own death to benefit all people," Steve Saint writes. "Forty years ago, Gikita was an unusually old man in a tribe that killed friends and relatives with the same zeal and greater frequency than they did their enemies. Now he is nearing 80 years of age and has seen his grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up without the constant fear of spearings. He has repeatedly asserted that all he wants to do is go to heaven and live peacefully with the five men who came to tell him about Wangongi, creator God."

Those five men understood the Lord's love for people. They also understood his anger toward sin. As a result, they offered up their lives for an obscure group of people in a jungle thousands of miles from home. They didn't shoot. They responded to the Lord's heart in an extraordinary way.

The passionate heart

If we understand the Lord's love for people and his anger toward sin, we'll be passionate about people -- passionate like Moses, passionate like Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully and Peter

Fleming.

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