

Understanding God in the Old Testament

A God of Forgiveness

Exodus 32-34

Turn with me this morning to the book of Exodus, particularly at chapter 32-34. I want to speak to you today about the God in the Old Testament as being a God of forgiveness. Forgiveness is something that all of us take for granted. When our guilt has been alleviated through the act of forgiveness, the weight of our offense seems to diminish and effects how we treat our sin in the future. Forgiveness is great when it is available, but when it is not one feels the full effects of their sin that can hang on for a lifetime.

We all want forgiveness. None of us likes carrying around our faults, our inadequacies, our inability, a constant reminder that we aren't all we think we are. We have a tendency to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We all sit here this morning with the understanding that in our core, we are selfish and arrogant idolatrous adulterers who are foulmouthed murdering thieves. The whole point of the ten commandments of God was to show us who we are and just how far short we fall from God's expectations.

We like it when this guilt is alleviated, yet our guilt and our shame far too often keep us in a state of humility. Unfortunately, forgiveness can dull that sense of humility. If we aren't careful, the forgiveness of God can be viewed as a license to stay the same and not change. It can keep us thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. We can take the forgiveness of God and turn it into our curse to remain the same and not seek change.

This morning we find ourselves in the book of Exodus, particularly a story that is well known. In fact, if you have ever watched that great Charlton Heston movie "Exodus" it is also documented. It is the story of the golden calf.

When we last left off we found that God wanted to be close to his people and that he wanted to live with them. God therefore establishes the tabernacle, a series of tents and walls that would be the dwelling place of God, and where the people could bring their sacrifices to God and find reunion once again. God has just spent 40 days and nights giving Moses the commandments and the instructions for building the tabernacle and the artifacts that were to be put in the tabernacle.

When people lack spiritual direction, when a spiritual leader is gone for such a long period of time, or when one isn't around their spiritual leader for such a long period of time, what happens? People get restless and careless, they start losing their edge in their faith, in fact, they may even walk away from their faith and find that they have in fact walked backwards - a great reason for consistency in church leadership and for people to be in church on Sunday morning. For some, the reason why they don't grow in their faith with God is because they aren't around people to remind them about their God and his plans for their lives.

This is exactly what happened to the children of Israel – they got restless and careless. Look at what it says in **Exodus 32:1**:

1 When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. “Come on,” they said, “make us some gods who can lead us. We don’t know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.”

There is that saying that states, “if you aren’t following something or someone, you will fall for anything.” When Moses wasn’t around they lacked the spiritual direction in their lives and tried to find solace in something else. Aaron falls into the peer pressure and asks for all of their gold and fashions a calf. The people responded in **Exodus 32:4**:

When the people saw it, they exclaimed, “O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

After the people experienced the deliverance of God, after they saw God lead them and guide them in the pillar of fire and cloud, after they had see the presence of God, they gave all the credit to their own man-made gods. In fact, it’s not much different than what we see mankind doing today. **Many have experienced the work of God in their life yet refuse to give credit to the God of scripture, and instead give credit to their own concept of who God is.**

Today, however we make it a little more complicated than just mere concepts, because today we make idols of so many things. An idol is something that takes the place of God in our lives – something that becomes our source of happiness, something that takes up our time, something that takes up our attention. An idol determines what we do and how we live.

Today, we can call many things idols – money, status, sports, religious activity, certain relationships, work, even fear – anything that steals time and focus away from God. In fact look at how the children of Israel respond to the gold calf in **Exodus 32:5-6**:

5 Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” 6 The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry.

It seems like the Israelites worshiped the calf the same way they worshiped God yet with a twist – just as any human being would do they did it with excess in themselves. Their celebration was not a means of worshipping God, but a means by which they could over indulge themselves.

In a sense I have seen the same happen in the church at large, where people will use the church as a place to indulge themselves and to take part of things that have no godly

origin. People have used the church as a place to get their attention fix, people have used the church as a place to gain authority, people have used the church as a place where they can get their needs met without any sense of accountability, people have used the church as a springboard to something else, when in reality the church is about a group of people finding God, learning about God, seeking him together, and growing and maturing us as God leads. People have used the church for selfish gain when the church has been created to bring glory, honor and worship to God.

We know that according to this portion of scripture that the people's worship went from sacrifices and offerings to feasting, drinking, and sexual misconduct. They adapted the pagan worship of sexual acts. They used religion as the cover for human satisfaction. In other words, the focus of worship turned to man's sinful self. God warns Moses of what is happening in **Exodus 32:7**:

7 The Lord told Moses, "Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.

I want you to notice whose people the Israelites become. God doesn't call them his people here, but calls them Moses' people. God disowns them because of their conduct. In fact, look a couple verse later in **Exodus 32:9-10**:

9 Then the Lord said, "I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. 10 Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them, and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation."

When sin comes into our lives, there a couple things that take place without the forgiveness of God – God disowns us and God's anger blazes against us. Without the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross, you and I would orphans with the anger of God raging against us. **The great gift of forgiveness cannot be fully appreciated until we understand what we would receive without it.** God is ready to destroy the Israelites, he is tired of their disobedience and their lack of consideration. Yet, Moses begs for the forgiveness of God. Moses represented the children of Israel just as Jesus now represents you and me to the father. Look at what Moses states in **Exodus 32:12-13**:

"Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all of this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.'"*

Moses reminds God of his promise to the Israelites. He calls upon God's covenant with them, just as Jesus goes to God the Father and recalls the covenant of the Good News. **Hebrews 5:4-9** tells us:

4 And no one can become a high priest simply because he wants such an honor. He must be called by God for this work, just as Aaron was. 5 That is why Christ did not honor himself by assuming he could become High Priest. No, he was chosen by God, who said to him, "You are my Son. Today I have become your Father." 6 And in another passage God said to him, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."* 7 While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could rescue him from death. And God heard his prayers because of his deep reverence for God. 8 Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. 9 In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest, and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him.*

Thank God we are no longer without ample representation – we have Jesus Christ who goes before God day and nights with our requests and who has fulfilled and sealed our forgiveness once and for all time. Yet, let me say this, **we need to see the seriousness of our sin, we need to see what sin does in our relationship with God, we need to understand the great grace that has been shown to us, otherwise we will simply keep on sinning with out any sense of responsibility to God.** God's grace is meant to get us to turn from our old way of doing things and make changes, not license to keep staying the same.

Moses heads back to the camp and he finds that the Israelites were worshiping a gold calf and he ends up throwing down the tablets containing the 10 commandments to the ground. We read in **Exodus 32:21**:

21 Finally, he turned to Aaron and demanded, "What did these people do to you to make you bring such terrible sin upon them?"

Ultimately, Moses holds Aaron responsible for bringing sin to the people. There will be a day when there will be church leaders held accountable for bringing sin into the church by teaching false doctrine. Yet, look at Aaron's response in **verse 22-24**:

22 "Don't get so upset, my lord," Aaron replied. "You yourself know how evil these people are. 23 They said to me, 'Make us gods who will lead us. We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.' 24 So I told them, 'Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off.' When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!"

Just like any human being, instead of taking responsibility he makes excuses – it's the people's fault, it's your fault, all I did was throw gold into the fire and out came a calf. **The first lessons we must learn before we can receive forgiveness is that we have to be willing to admit that we are responsible for our actions.** We can't blame others or circumstances for our own unwillingness to follow God's directions. **Taking responsibility not only means to admit what we did, but it also means that we are willing to do what we need to in order to make things right.** That is what God asks of them in **Exodus 32:26-28**:

26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and shouted, "All of you who are on the Lord's side, come here and join me." And all the Levites gathered around him. 27 Moses told them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Each of you, take your swords and go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other. Kill everyone—even your brothers, friends, and neighbors." 28 The Levites obeyed Moses' command, and about 3,000 people died that day.

Despite the many times that God had worked on behalf of the Israelites, there was still those who would not embrace his work and who would continue to lead others away from him. The influence of those who wanted pagan God's only to satisfy their own desires needed to be taken cared of, otherwise a whole nation would become influenced and walk away from God. Things needed to be set right and therefore the people were given an opportunity to choose who they would serve. Those who refused to follow God were put to death.

Life on earth is about having the opportunity to choose. Those of us who will embrace God and his son Jesus Christ will experience forgiveness and spiritual life, yet those who don't will have the anger and wrath of God, the hopelessness of spiritual death and separation from God. Things will be put right. Moses goes back to God in **Exodus 32:31-35** and pleads for God's forgiveness:

31 So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a terrible sin these people have committed. They have made gods of gold for themselves. 32 But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, erase my name from the record you have written!" 33 But the Lord replied to Moses, "No, I will erase the name of everyone who has sinned against me. 34 Now go, lead the people to the place I told you about. Look! My angel will lead the way before you. And when I come to call the people to account, I will certainly hold them responsible for their sins." 35 Then the Lord sent a great plague upon the people because they had worshiped the calf Aaron had made.

Keep in mind that these words are based on life without Jesus Christ. Without the work of Jesus on the cross we would receive God's anger, his destruction, his separation from us, his disowning us and his punishment. Look at how God viewed the children of Israel in **Exodus 33:3**:

"But I will not travel among you, for you are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I did, I would surely destroy you along the way."

In other words, "if I was with you long enough I would destroy you because of your sinfulness. I can't be with you very long." That is how God sees us without the work of Jesus Christ. Our sin is so great that God can't stand to be with us – he wants to but our sin sickens him. The people of Israel were in great danger of losing the presence of God. In fact in **Exodus 33:15-17** it tells us:

15 Then Moses said, “If you don’t personally go with us, don’t make us leave this place. 16 How will anyone know that you look favorably on me—on me and on your people—if you don’t go with us? For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth.” 17 The Lord replied to Moses, “I will indeed do what you have asked, for I look favorably on you, and I know you by name.”

The great covenant that God made with the Israelites was that he would be their God and they would be his people and that out of all the nations of the world, the Israelites would be unique because God would be with them. Sin separates us from God, it removes the only unique aspect of Christianity that doesn’t exist in any other religions – that is that when one becomes a Christian God comes and lives within the person in a close and intimate relationship.

God knows me by name – not that I simply exist, but that we have a close relationship with each other. That is why we say that **true Christianity isn’t simply a religions or set of rules and regulations, but that it is a relationship with our Creator.** Look at what God says to Moses in **Exodus 34:6-7:**

6 The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, “Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. 7 I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations.* I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.”*

Despite who and what we are, God is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger, full of unfailing love and faithfulness, ready to forgive iniquity, rebellion and sin. Yet there is a catch. We have to find a way to get rid of the guilt - and the only way for that to happen is through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Notice in verse 7 here that it says “but I do not excuse the guilty.” The penalty of our sins has to be paid for somehow otherwise it will be passed on to future generations until they find the work of Jesus applicable to them. **Acts 2:38** states:

38 Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus Christ releases us from our guilt and makes us God’s child once again. Look at Moses’ prayer in **Exodus 34:9:**

“Yes, this is a stubborn and rebellious people, but please forgive our iniquity and our sins. Claim us as your own special possession.”

Today, you and I have a special relationship with God. Despite our arrogance, our pride, our disobedience and our rebellion Jesus Christ has made it possible for us to find the

grace and mercy of God. It is a great gift. Let us not allow the great gift of forgiveness diminish the seriousness of sin and the great problem that we face thinking that “that’s just who I am” and using it as a license to test God’s patience in the future. We serve a God who forgives beyond what we deserve. Let us live our lives with great gratitude of this great gift of grace. Let’s pray!