

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD OF GRACE
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“If God was small enough for us to understand, He wouldn’t be big enough for us to worship” (Author Unknown). Today’s lesson is the ninth in our series of studies from the biblical Book of Exodus. Over the past two-and-a-half months, we have been on a quest—a quest to find God. The arrogant and defiant words of Pharaoh in Exod 5:2—“Who is Yahweh?”—state the question that we have sought to answer. For me, the lessons have been increasingly difficult. Why? Because I am running out of words with which to describe God. Yahweh, the Sovereign Savior, He is as indescribable as He is incomprehensible. I am not saying that we cannot know God. But I am saying that the more we know, the more we know that there is so much more to know. After all, “if God was small enough for us to understand, He wouldn’t be big enough for us to worship.”

Today, we come to the story where for the first time in the Old Testament divine forgiveness becomes a fundamental way of relating to sin; in other words, where forgiveness first appears as the way God deals with human sin. Today, we come to the story that sets the pattern for scripture’s story and, in fact, makes the rest of scripture possible. Today, we come to the story where we may be brought as close to God as it is possible for scripture to take us. It is the story of the Golden Calf, and it is found in Exodus chapters 32, 33, and 34. The Book of Exodus reaches its theological conclusion with these chapters, for they tell how the covenant relationship continues in spite of on-going sinfulness.

Since, unfortunately, we do not have time to read these three chapters in their entirety, I will summarize the story, highlighting various details along the way. Moses has been on Mount Sinai for some forty days and nights receiving from Yahweh instructions for the tabernacle. His prolonged stay on the mountain has led to uneasiness and unrest among the Israelites. Fearful that they have lost the only mediator between

God and themselves, they confront Aaron and demand that he fashion a god who will lead them in place of Moses. Aaron tells the people to surrender to him their gold earrings. This they do, and Aaron makes of them a golden calf. The calf was most likely a wooden model that was overlaid with gold. At the sight of this image, the people respond with the cry, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:4). Aaron then builds an altar in front of the calf and announces that “a festival to Yahweh” will be celebrated tomorrow. The people rise early the next morning, offer up sacrifices, feast, and make merry.

At this point, on the mountain, God apprises Moses of the situation in the Israelite camp, threatens to wipe out the people, and promises to start afresh by making Moses the father of a new nation. In other words, Moses and his descendants would become the sole heirs to the promises made to the patriarchs. Moses, however, nobly (and boldly) refuses to accept Yahweh’s proposal and instead earnestly entreats Yahweh on behalf of Israel. Moses’ intercession succeeds in calming down God, causing God to change His mind regarding the intended punishment. Moses then descends the mountain, carrying with him the stone tablets. When he witnesses for himself the scene, he realizes the full extent of the wickedness that had taken place and recognizes the enormity of the people’s sin. And so, he shatters the tablets at the foot of the mountain in the presence of the revelers. It is doubtful that Moses’ smashing of the tablets was an impetuous act. Far more likely, it possessed legal symbolism signifying Israel’s blatant breaking of the covenant. Moses proceeds to burn the golden calf, pulverize it, scatter the powder on the water, and make the people drink the mixture. The Israelites go berserk, and Moses issues a call for those who “are for the LORD.” The Levites rally to his side, and a slaughter of three thousand persons begins. This slaughter could have been avoided if everyone had responded positively to Moses’ call.

Following these events, Moses and Yahweh enter into intense negotiations. To state the matter bluntly and more accurately, Yahweh and Moses “have it out.” Earlier in the story, Yahweh said to Moses, “Now, leave Me alone, that My anger may blaze forth against them [the Israelites] and that I may consume them, and make of you [Moses] a great nation” (Exod 32:10). What an incredible statement about the nature of God! Not only does He anticipate Moses’ intercession for Israel, He actually invites it. Yahweh is

a God who, although He is fully in charge, will change His plans as a result of human intervention. He listens to Moses' appeals, and He grants them! Israel, worthy of annihilation, is spared. *Yahweh is the God of Grace!* Having been told to leave God alone, that is precisely what Moses does *not* do: he will not let God alone.

Fundamentally, Moses' insistence that God change is based on his conviction as to what is unchangeable in God; namely, His unwavering desire to save. And so, as a result of human intervention, salvation is granted to an apostate people. Salvation at this point in the story is simply survival, but that's a start!

Ok, now back to Yahweh and Moses "having it out" after Moses has vented his anger upon the idol-worshippers. Moses implores Yahweh to forgive the people. Now listen to the words of Yahweh: "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiffnecked [obstinate] people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would finish you off! Now, then, put off your festive dress, and I will decide what I am to do with you'" (Exod 33:5). Do you hear what God is saying? Do you see the struggle that is going on within God? How can He be faithful to an unfaithful people? How can a covenant-keeping God tolerate a covenant-breaking people? How can a holy God commune with an unholy people? How will Yahweh deal with sin? Near the end of the dialogue between Yahweh and Moses, listen to what Moses says: "Please, if I have gained Your favor, O Lord, please, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked [obstinate] people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own possession!" (Exod 34:9). With the exception of Jesus' prayer on the cross—"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)—no other words in scripture cut to my heart as do the words of Moses to Yahweh. Here, then, is the essence of the conversation between God and Moses. Yahweh says, "I cannot dwell among Israel *because* they are a stiffnecked people." Moses responds, "Lord, You must dwell among Israel *because* we are a stiffnecked people." Do you hear what is being said? Yahweh proclaims, "I cannot be with you because you are a stubborn and sinful people." Moses pleads, "Lord, because we are a stubborn and sinful people You cannot leave us!" It is *because* of human sinfulness that God promises to stay with the world. We human beings do not deserve the divine presence or divine forgiveness. But because we are so utterly helpless and hopeless without them, God graciously grants both. Amazing . . . absolutely amazing. In

His dialogue with Moses, Yahweh declares, “I will grant the grace that I will grant and show the compassion that I will show” (Exod 33:19). The exercise of Yahweh’s grace is an act of pure choice on His part. God does what does because He is who He is. *Yahweh is the God of Grace!*

But let’s return to our story. The good part is coming! I am now at chapter 34. Yahweh instructs Moses to once again chisel out two stone tablets, like the first two, and return to the top of Mount Sinai. Let’s read together, beginning with verse 4. (The translation is my own.)

So [Moses] chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones. Then Moses set off early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, exactly as Yahweh had commanded him, and he carried in his hands the two stone tablets. Yahweh came down in a cloud, and He stood there with [Moses] and called out the name Yahweh. Then Yahweh passed in front of Moses and called out: “Yahweh! Yahweh!—a God compassionate¹ and gracious,² slow to anger,³ over-flowing with loyal-love⁴ and faithfulness,⁵ extending loyal-love to a thousand [generations], taking away guilt and transgression and sin; yet, [a God] certainly not neglecting just punishment, punishing the children and the children’s children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations” (Exod 34:4-7).

This list of divine attributes is one of the most remarkable passages in the Old Testament, and it obviously meant a great deal to ancient Israel, since there are quotations of it or echoes of it in at least twenty-five other passages, including law, historical narrative, prayers, and prophetic texts. It is a kind of Bible within the Bible: a summary statement of Israel’s basic beliefs about Yahweh. “Yahweh! Yahweh!—a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, over-flowing with loyal-love and faithfulness . . .” The rest of the statement sets up an essential contrast: forgiveness on the one hand, but punishment on the other. “Extending loyal-love to a thousand generations . . . yet, certainly not neglecting just punishment. – Taking away guilt and transgression and sin . . . but punishing the children and the children’s children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations.” God does not declare the guilty innocent or the innocent guilty, or say it really doesn’t matter. There is no such thing as grace unless right is still right

¹ רַחוּם (*rakhum*).

² חַנּוּן (*khannun*).

³ אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם (*'erekh 'appayim*—lit.: long of nose).

⁴ חֶסֶד (*khasedh*).

⁵ אֱמֶת (*'emeth*).

and wrong is still wrong. This brings us squarely up against the mystery of forgiveness—how God can be just and still forgive sin—and scripture does the best it can with the formulation we have before us. As a God of justice, Yahweh maintains standards that are never compromised. Guilt is guilt, without apology, and guilt of the kind we have encountered in the Golden-Calf-story leads to death. Grace is not indulgence, saying, well, you really shouldn't do that but if you do I probably won't do anything about it. Grace is not something that can be claimed, as if the standards were faulty or impossibly high, and so God really owes us leniency. Grace finds us condemned, and then for some reason we do not know, set free. That is what has happened in this story. Moses has just been trying to save his people's skins, and then to get some help to get them through the wilderness. But now comes a new covenant, after the first had been, to all appearances, nullified. That happens entirely by the initiative of a God of grace. This time there are no provisions for acceptance by the people nor any ceremony for sealing the covenant. The restoration of the original covenant is made possible solely on the basis of the nature of the character of Yahweh.

This brings us to verses 10 and 11.

And so [Yahweh] said, "All right. I hereby make a covenant. In the sight of all your people I will do wondrous works the likes of which have not even been imagined in all the earth or in any nation. And all the peoples around you will witness the work of Yahweh, that what I am doing with you is awesome (Exod 34:10-11).

What is the wondrous work that Yahweh will perform? What is the unimaginable feat that He will accomplish? What is the awesome thing that He will do with Israel? . . . He is forgiving a sinful people. . . . Let me repeat that—He is forgiving a sinful people. I want to state this as shocking as I know how. *Yahweh places His relationship with Israel on a new footing. It is now grounded on this act of Yahweh: undeserved divine forgiveness of an apostate people. The covenant is in place simply because Yahweh has determined that it be so.* What might happen should the people choose apostasy once again is not stated, although the fact that Yahweh is a jealous God—as is made clear in this context—means that He will not, indeed cannot, remain unmoved by such a turn of events. And His being moved will entail both pain and anger.

Here is the point that I want to leave with you. Entirely on the basis of God's initiative, at a moment in Israel's life where the people were the most vulnerable and

where they could call on no goodness of their own, Yahweh acted on Israel's behalf: He forgave their sins. . . . I am speechless. . . . I have run out of words. . . .

“Yahweh! Yahweh!—a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal-love and faithfulness . . .” Only such a God could and would send His one and only Son to die for you and for me because we are sinful. In the words of the Apostle Paul,

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. . . . God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners (Rom 5:6, 8, NLT).

The God of Grace invites you into a covenant relationship with Himself. He, and He alone, has done everything to make such a relationship possible. Only one thing remains—You must say “Yes.” The choice is yours.

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