

Who God Forgives

Exodus

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Bible Text: Exodus 34:1-9
Preached on: Sunday, March 24, 2019

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Exodus 34, we begin reading at verse 1 and read through the end of verse 9.

1 The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. 2 Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. 3 No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." 4 So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. 5 The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 6 The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." 8 And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. 9 And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

This is God's word.

Let's pray.

Father, as we read these word, we can't help but get just a sense of your holiness. No one was to come up into the mountain except the one that you appointed. Flocks and herds couldn't even be on the opposite side of the mountain. You are such a holy God and we are such sinfully flawed people. At the same time, you are a God who forgives and we cannot help but celebrate this and the appropriate thing would be to do as Moses did, Moses quickly bowed his head and worshiped you at this declaration. Lord, where are at

on that? Is our heart sensitive in such a way as a teenager, as a young adult, as an aged senior, or is our heart in such a place that we would hear something like this and we would just have to worship you? We would have to say, "You are the God of all Gods, you are the greatest being in the universe." How could we not surrender to you and follow you? So Holy Spirit, help us today, help us to get to a place where Moses got where we worship the Lord. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

When I was 13 years old, I did something that I should not have done. Now you say, "Well, that could be true of all of us at any age." And that's right, but I did something that I should not have done and it was foolish and the worst part of it was it broke my parents' heart. Now I've told this story before and I'm not gonna go into the details of it all today but I will say I felt terrible. I felt terrible. I remember that feeling to this day and it's been, you know, what, 50 years ago. I remember feeling terrible because, again, I broke my parents' heart and I remember feeling that our relationship would never be the same, that we would not be able to get over this. I remember my dad walking into the room where I was at, I'll never forget his face, never forget the tone of his voice, the crack in his voice when he saw me and he said, "Oh no, not this." My sin, my dishonor to my parents, I thought was so irreparable, I felt that this will never be the same, we will never relate the same way as we did before this. I thought that but how they handled things in the proceeding days with both firmness and gentleness, it was as if they were able to peer into my heart and see my despair. Now I don't know to this day how they managed it, how they navigated the situation but I'll tell you what, how they moved to restore the relationship and give me hope impacted my life that remains, it's such an impact that it remains with me today. I can't hardly think about the episode without just being deeply moved and so grateful for how my parents handled the situation.

You know, to better appreciate our text and, you know, I hold this text up over any others but just to be able to appreciate today's text, it would be helpful for us to remember just a few basic things. The Israelites have done something that they should not have done. Last week in Exodus 32, we looked at the Israelites as they forsook the God who had saved them. The way the Psalmist put it is they exchanged the glory of God for idols. Remember they built a golden calf and it was as if, it was as if God walked in the room and said, "Oh no, not this." They had decided that they would have a god, they were very religious people and they would have a god, however they wanted a god constructed on their terms and this provoked a crisis in their relationship with God that was so severe that God was ready to wipe them out. That's what we read in chapter 32. The breach in the relationship was so severe that God said gonna wipe them out, gonna destroy them, gonna start over with Moses.

So as we think about this, we ask what hope would there be for such sinful people? What hope would there be for these people who have done what they should not have done, they had clear commands and they broke them, they were defiant, they turned away, what kind of hope is there? Is there any hope for people like that? Could their relationship with God be restored? And the answer to these questions will rest entirely upon the character of God. This morning, we're going to consider who God forgives and who he doesn't forgive. That may sound strange in our world, but we're gonna consider for a few minutes

who God forgives and who he does not forgive. Then we'll take a few minutes and look at the father's sins and the children's sins, that curious part of verse 7. I wonder what does this mean? Then we'll take some time to look at how God can forgive and also punish.

So first, let's consider who God forgives and who he doesn't forgive. A little background here before we get into chapter 34, there's something happened in chapter 33. Moses was asking God, he said, "I want to see your glory. Let me see your glory." Glory, the word means weight, heaviness, importance. We'll talk more about it next week when we finish up the book of Exodus in chapter 40, but glory is weightiness, importance, heaviness. Moses said, "I want to see your glory. Let me see your glory." And he was informed that that was not possible. You see, we find in Scripture that sinful man cannot endure the direct sight of the glory of a holy God. That's just not gonna happen. However, Moses was allowed to see a part.

Now you might say, "What would that look like? What would it look like to see just a part of God's glory?" Well, we don't have to wonder anymore because beginning in chapter 6 this is the way that God determined that he would reveal a portion of his glory. It says, "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed." God revealed his portion of glory in a proclamation and we see it in verse 6. "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands,' notice this part, "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Part of God's glory is that God forgives sin. Now stop and we'll agree together this is great news, right? It's great news because we are sinful people. It's great news that God forgives. He wants us to know. He says, "Let me show you some of my weightiness, my heaviness. Let me show you some of my importance, my beauty, my grandeur, my majesty. Let me show you just a part of it. A part of it is I forgive." So on one hand, God forgives and that is great news, but on the other hand, he said, "I do not clear the guilty." All in one verse. All in one verse we find that God forgives and that's great news, but on the other hand we also find that he does not clear the guilty. So here's the question: who are the guilty that God forgives and who are the guilty he refuses to forgive? Let's see if we can find the answer.

Now here's how we'll go looking for it, okay? This proclamation that we read in verses 6 and 7, this proclamation of God's glory and his nature is repeated a few other times in the Old Testament. It's repeated in the book of Jonah. It's repeated in the book of Joel. I want you to see something in the book of Joel that will help us to answer this question. "Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart with fasting, with weeping and with mourning and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and he relents over disaster." You do see the similarity, right? It's, again, it's a repeat of what God is saying in the book of Exodus. So in the book of Joel, quick question, stay with me: who is God talking to? Who is God saying this to? The answer is he's saying it to his rebellious people. God is speaking to later in history to his rebellious people that he loves, and he is proclaiming to them these things to encourage them that if they will return to the Lord, notice that phrase, that if they will return to the Lord, God on the other hand will turn away from what he is about to bring upon them. God is saying to a

rebellious people, "If you will repent, if you will repent I will not bring disaster upon you. You are guilty, you are rebellious, you have sin, but if you will turn back to me," another word for that is repent, "if you will repent, I will not bring disaster upon you." That's what's happening in the book of Joel.

Now let's just think about our text that we looked at. Who is God speaking to in the book of Exodus in chapter 34? He is speaking to his rebellious people, right? They've gone off the rails. They've made a golden calf. They've exchanged the glory of God for an idol. God is speaking to his rebellious people. God is saying to them, "I forgive yet I'm not gonna clear the guilty." But you and I know that in one sense all sinners are guilty, right? All sinners are guilty and so which guilty sinners will God forgive and which ones will he not forgive? Answer: God will forgive repentant people who return to the Lord with all their heart. He will not forgive those who remain unrepentant. Do you see that? It's really important because we have in one verse God declaring, "Let me tell you something about myself. I forgive. I forgive guilty sinners but I don't forgive guilty sinners who don't repent. I don't forgive guilty sinners who will not rend their heart. Oh, they rend their garment but they won't rend their heart." What does that mean? It means they'll go through the show, they'll go through the religious show but God is after our heart. Rending our garments we'll show up at church, we'll show up, do all of our religious stuff and God said, "Rend your heart. Be sincere, genuine, authentic. Confess your sin. Turn from your sin. Turn back to me and I'll forgive you." But if a person remains unrepentant, then God will not clear the guilty.

Secondly, let's look at the father's sin and the children's sin. Look at verse 7, the latter part of verse 7, it sounds kinda hard, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Now this raises for some an issue of fairness because when we first read this, to paraphrase this would be God's saying, "Look, I'm gonna, you know, you fathers and parents who've sinned, I'm gonna come down on your kids. I'm gonna come down on your sons and your daughters and the ones you have now and your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren." And this verse has been terribly terribly abused and there are parts of the church, there are some people who believe in family curses and, "Somehow I've got to break these family curses," because of verses like this and that is not at all, not at all, not at all what these verses are talking about.

But what are they talking about? You do know it's helpful, you read a verse in the Bible and you're stumped. You say, "Wow, what's this?" You do realize it's helpful to read other portions of Scripture. Let me give you an example. In Ezekiel 18 there's something that we need to see here to help us understand what God is saying in Exodus 7. So in Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son." Now just stop and see the text that we're looking at, Exodus seems to say otherwise but notice what Ezekiel says, Ezekiel says, "Look, the soul who sins is gonna die. That person who is guilty is gonna bear the guilt." It's not like the father sins and then we're gonna kill the son. No, the soul who sins shall die. But then it says, "the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son."

Now that seems to contradict Exodus 34:7. So how do we understand this? And I want to suggest that it's this, it's important to understand what each writer has in view. For example, Ezekiel has in view a son who does not follow in the sinful footsteps of their father. For example, when Ezekiel is speaking about and you'll see it, you'll see on the overhead another verse right before this verse, "When the son has done what is just and right, he has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live." In other words, let's say there's a father who says, "I'm gonna go down this sinful path. I'm gonna be defiant. I'm not gonna go the way of God, I'm gonna go against the grain." But the son or the daughter says, "Not me. I'm going this way. I'm gonna go God's way." Well, then when that son has done what is just and right, has been careful to preserve all my statutes, he shall surely live. He's not gonna have to pay for the sins of his father or his mother, you see.

That's what Ezekiel has in view, but in our text what does the writer of Exodus have in view? Well, our passage in Exodus has in view children who do continue in their parents' sinful footsteps. In other words, dad goes down this road, mom goes down this road and the children go right down the same road. You see, when God visits the sins of the fathers on the children, he is not punishing sinless children for the sins of their fathers. He does allow – now listen – he does allow the effects of the father's sins to take their natural course, which means the more a parent lets sin get the upper hand in their life, the more their children will suffer for it, and all of that is to say again the seriousness of sin. Mom, dad, if we love our children this should sober us up. If we love our grandchildren, this should sober us up. Sin is serious and God is saying if you decide to follow the wrong path, whoever sets that path, mom or dad, if they follow that path God will visit iniquity upon them.

Well, finally that brings us to one other question from this magnificent text: how can God forgive and also punish? Now I think most of you are aware that we live in a culture, undeniably we live in a culture where the majority of people seem to believe that God only knows how to do one of those two things and that's forgive, that somehow he's obligated, that he's just go to do it. He wouldn't be God if he didn't. But you do see for God's people, we're seeing something here in verse 7, God forgives and he punishes. God forgives and he punishes. How can God forgive and also punish?

Well, I think it would be helpful if we just unpack a few words here. What do we see in the proclamation that God brings? He's one, he's merciful. You see, in life, you know, the clouds can come in, we don't always see and understand like we should do to clouds and trials and heartaches and sometimes we can feel kind of a little upset with God, and so proclamations like this kind of help part the clouds for us and help us to see God as he truly is, not how we think he is but how he has said he is.

He is merciful. Now what does that mean when God says that he's merciful? Well, it's a word that we get the word compassion. God is compassionate or he cares. He cares about our situation. Now that means that whatever you're going through right now, no matter how you feel about it, God says, "I care about you. I care about you. I care about the

situation that you're in." But why? Because he's a merciful God. He's a compassionate God. He cares about his people and he wants you and me to know that.

So he's merciful but he's also gracious. That means that rather than give us what we deserve, he gives us something we don't deserve which is grace.

He's also slow to anger. Now that doesn't mean that God never gets angry, it just means that he's slow getting there, right? And that's a good thing, you see, because we're not that way, are we? You know, we're pretty quick to get angry but God is slow to anger and that's a good thing for sinful people to know.

He's abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Now abounding is the key word there. He's overflowing just like a spring that just runs and runs and you think, "I just don't know if God can love me anymore. I don't know." Well, he's abounding in steadfast love, it's just flowing and flowing and flowing, neverending for his people.

But then we get to this word forgive again. Do you see it in verse 7? "Forgiving," now notice this, "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Why does God say all three? Why doesn't he just say, "I forgive sin," and we all go, "Yea! That's good! That's great!" Why does God say, "I forgive iniquity, I forgive transgression, I forgive sins"? Well, here's what I do know. I can't read God's mind but I do know this, he has just given us three categories of sin. Three categories of sin and that's really helpful.

For example, "I forgive iniquity." Iniquity is translated also wickedness. It literally means to turn aside. God lays out the path, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt have no graven images." And they turn aside and they make a golden calf. They committed iniquity. They committed wickedness. They turned aside. God said, "I forgive that kind of sin, by the way, because I forgive, I forgive that kind of sin. I forgive that kind of sin where you twist, your iniquity, you twist things. I forgive that kind of sin."

Then he said, "forgiving transgressions." Now this is worse. Transgression is also translated rebellion and it means defiant. It's different than turn aside. One can turn aside because they have been led astray, you see, there's been influence upon them and they've fallen under delusion and they're turned away. They're still guilty, still guilty but transgression, rebellion, defiance, that's different. That's, "No! No! I don't care what you said, no!" It's important for us to see God says, "Hey, I forgive that kind of sin," because you see, you and I might go, "Oh, I guess he could forgive me, I guess he'd forgive me for this here. I don't know if he can forgive me for this. That's really big." It turns out he can.

He said, "I forgive iniquity, I forgive transgression," and then he said, "I forgive sins," and that word is any kind of moral failure. That pretty well wraps it up, doesn't it? God's saying, "Look, I don't care how bad you've been, what you've done, I'm a God who forgives. I'm a God who forgives."

Notice here there's no category that God gives of unforgivable sin with the exception of unrepented sin. So it's not the kind of sin that excludes somebody. It's not a certain category as though, "Oh, you fall into the bad category. You can't be forgiven." No, no, it's unrepentance. Do you see that? God forgives guilty sinners who repent but he does not clear guilty sinners who are unrepentant and it turns out, doesn't it, that this is exactly the God that the Israelites need. They've turned aside. They've been defiant. They have committed moral sin. This is exactly the kind of God that they need. It's exactly the kind of God that you and I need, yet God is also a God who punishes.

Now I hope as you're sitting there today that you're still with me and you're beginning to feel the tension. "Okay, Brother Van, you're saying God forgives but at the same time you keep saying he punishes, and we've got this and we've got this." You see, God is gracious and he forgives yet he doesn't declare that sin doesn't matter. You see, that's where our world has taken it to. Our culture says God forgives, he just forgives and somehow that God doesn't see sin as being serious, yet God is righteous and he doesn't let sin go unpunished.

I should mention here that there's two kinds of people that are going to hear this. The one kind of person is the person who feels they have gone too far to be forgiven, and I've met that person many times over the last 25 years, and they may be here today. The person who feels like, "I've gone too far." You know, when I rebelled against my parents, when I did what I did, I did, I felt as if this is irreparable. There's no way that things are going to be the same. And you can have this, when the sin, sin lands upon you and you begin to feel the effects of it and the consequences of it, it is so deceitful, sin is so deceitful that you will begin to think, "I've gone too far. I've gone too far." So there's that kind of person but then sadly there's the other kind of person who is blind and indifferent to the seriousness of their sin. On one side you've got this person who is in agony, "Oh, I can't be forgiven! Oh, oh!" And they've got the other person over here that's just kind of flippant, just kind of indifferent, "Eh, yeah."

How will God address both of these people? How will God address both of these people and be able to help both of these kind of people? Well, he does in these passages, by the way. Now here's how I want you to think it through with me. I'm gonna be done in just a few short minutes. I want you to think with me, though. Right now in Exodus 34 with everything that's going on, what God has in his heart right now, we know this because we know the chapters that come after this, in God's heart is to set up an elaborate sacrificial system to deal with the sin of his people. Remember he said, "Build me a tabernacle. I want to dwell with you." And if you'll stay with that, if you'll stay with that, in fact, a couple of weeks we're gonna start on Wednesday nights and we're going to be looking at the tabernacle and all its furnishings, we're gonna look at it for a few weeks just to help better understand it, but God's gonna set into motion this elaborate sacrificial system that's gonna deal with the sins of his people. He doesn't think for a moment that all sin's done, it's over, it's over, it's wrapped up. No, he's gonna set up a system where sacrifices are gonna be made. There's gonna be an enormous amount of blood that's gonna be shed, day after day people bringing in sacrifice after sacrifice for their sins. People will be forgiven and live because something else died in their place. And every day, every day,

every day it should have been upon the mind of every person every day the seriousness of sin. "I sin and something dies. I sin, something dies." Which is to say, yes, sin is serious whether it is iniquity, transgression or sins, and yes, all those willing to trust and repent can be forgiven. And for you and I who are living in 2019 under the new covenant on this side of the cross, we know that this entire system that God set up, all of it in all of the many sacrifices were pointing to the ultimate once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

So here's the question one more time and we'll wrap up. How can God forgive and also punish? And the answer is God would work this out at the cross. This dilemma that we face, this tension God forgives but he punishes, how will God work this out? He worked it out at the cross because on the cross Jesus died to make atonement for our sins. Do you see the word forgive in verse 7? Forgiving? It literally means to lift or to carry. God is saying to his rebellious people, "I lift and carry your iniquities. I lift and carry your transgressions. When you confess and repent before me, when you rend your heart, I lift these things. I lift them off of you." And then we see the beauty of that concept in Isaiah 53 when we read of Jesus, "He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we've turned every one to his own way," you see, that's iniquity, "and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." It was lifted up off of us and placed on Christ and Jesus carried our sin and in doing so he satisfied God's justice, that something that we did wrong, that God looked at and said, "No, not this," it was lifted off of us and placed upon Christ. On the other hand, the cross was also an act of mercy and grace because anyone who trusts in Jesus is fully forgiven.

Now there's two people here this morning, two kinds of people, there are those who are forgiven not because you are special, not because you're in the right church, you're forgiven because of the character of God; you're forgiven because you have repented and you live a lifestyle of repentance. This has not been one time. It's not something you did 20 years ago but you never revisited. No, you have a heart of repentance which means that you feel an urgency to be right with God no matter what the cost is. That's the heart of repentance. "I want to be right with God no matter what this cost, no matter what this takes, no matter what I have to give up, no matter what I have to turn my back on. I want to be right with God." This is the person who's saying this morning in a minute, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

Yes, there are those here this morning and, man, you ought to shout for joy you've been forgiven. The slate's clean. You're forgiven. And if that's you, God has been gracious to you. It's not because of any special quality in you, it's because of the character of God. God has been gracious to you and therefore God's grace does not do away with your need for obedience. God expects those who have experienced his forgiveness to be all the more committed to obeying him. That's the word for me and you today. For those who are here that are forgiven, you know, you know, "I'm forgiven based upon the character of God. I've repented. I've turned from my sin and I'm doing that daily because I want to do whatever it takes to be right with God."

But then there's a second person here this morning. There's just no way around this, folks, you're either forgiven or you're unforgiven. You see, perhaps you have lived without an urgency to be right with God. You don't really have any ax to grind with God but you just decided that you were gonna live the way you wanted to live, you're gonna live against the grain of God and you've never really had an urgency to be right with God, but perhaps, perhaps as of late, perhaps today, I don't know, but perhaps you have begun to feel the weight of your sin, perhaps as of late you've begun to feel, "I've done something wrong. I have sinned against God. I've given him no place in my life. I've lived for myself. I've ignored him." Perhaps you feel the weight and if you do, if you do in any sense, it is a sure mark of God acting on your soul. It's not because you're a good person. It's not because you've figured it out. It's because God by his Spirit is working on your soul. He's being good to you. If you're feeling the weight of your sin, if you are convicted of your sin, it is God being kind to you, confronting you with the truth that you're afraid to admit and the guilt that you prefer to ignore, and if you're feeling the weight of your sin, if you're feeling the conviction of your sin, turn to the Lord. Rend your heart. Repent. Turn to the Lord and here's what you will find, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."