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“God’s Nature”

Sermon Series: “Forgiveness,” No. 2

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Exodus 34:1-8

1 The Lord said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. 2 Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. 3 No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”

4 So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. 5 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

8 Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

Would you take a Bible and turn with me back to Exodus chapter 34? That’s our text this morning, and verses 6 and 7 in particular.

Exodus 34.

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This might strike you as a strange place in the Bible to begin talking about forgiveness – our theme on Sunday mornings now through Resurrection Day. My hope, though, is to convince you that it’s not so strange a place, but it is, in fact, a **perfectly natural** place to begin thinking of forgiveness ... and I’ll give you two reasons why.

First, because this passage gives us as fine a summary as we can get of God’s character – which includes, in a big way, a forgiving heart; and second, because God the Father, due to His character, is the **originator** and **initiator** of the whole idea of forgiveness in our world.

Too many Christians seem to think the whole idea of forgiveness started with Jesus or the cross or the empty tomb, and that God the Father is some mean old **grump** who’s just looking for someone to **zap**.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

***Forgiveness begins*** in the heart of **God** the **Father**.

God declares that explicitly here in this passage. In describing what He's like, God tells Moses in verse 7 there, ***"I am the forgiver of wickedness, rebellion and sin."***

Do you notice how comprehensive that is? It's like God tried to find every word He could to explain what He forgives.

But we're not just ***told***, here in this passage, that God's heart is to forgive. We see God live it out.

And let me say...if ever the Israelites needed to know that God is a forgiving God, it was right here at this time of their national life.

If you look back just a bit earlier in the book, you can read about, arguably, the biggest act of insurrection against God that the Israelites ever committed – at least to this point.

Moses, their leader who'd led them out of Egypt, had climbed the mountain – Sinai. He brought back God's words to the people telling them how to live successfully with Him. You can see in chapter 24 verse 7, that the people received that and promised, ***"We will do everything the Lord has said...we will obey!"***

And with the words of that promise still hanging in the air, verse 9 tells us that Moses returned to the mountain, and there God gave him all sorts of different principles and rules for how to build and furnish the tabernacle and how to consecrate the priests...basically to let the nation of Israel know how to worship Him properly. That's what the trip was all about.

And then, Moses time on the mountain ends with God giving him...you can see there in chapter 31, verse 18, two stone tablets of the commandments, written, it says there, ***"by the finger of God himself."***

That's what was happening between Moses and God on the mountain and I'd think that, in a life full of remarkable moments, this had to be one of the most exhilarating times of Moses' life.

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But ... ***back in the valley***...or maybe I should say, "meanwhile, back at the ranch," back in the Israelite camp, things were not going nearly as well.

We're told Moses was up on the mountain with God for 40 days...and the Israelites grew impatient.¹

Maybe we can understand this a bit...it happens in either newly formed or immature groups...companies...school classrooms: when the key figure...the leader...the teacher steps away for a while, the people, very dependent on that person for direction, don't seem to know what to do.

The phrase, "When the cat's away, the mice will play," comes to mind.

¹ Exodus 24:18

Watching the fire up there on the mountain... **where Moses was**, and realizing he'd been gone so long without, supposedly food and water, the people gave up hope for him, and they didn't know what to do.

Now, they had options.

They could have waited in faith, which, let me say, is nearly always the best thing to do when we don't know what to do. But waiting in faith takes...well...**faith**...and a measure of discipline that people don't often have.

So just like we do sometimes, the people there figured it was better to do **something**.

So they **did something**, and as often happens when we do that, the something that they did was the **wrong** thing to do.

They prevailed upon Aaron, who was the next-in-line leader and who should have known better, to create a god for them to worship. It's sad to say that Aaron didn't even seem to object, and his agreement led to the creation of the golden calf...an imitation of the powerless idols of the nations that surrounded them.

After **all** God had **done** so **miraculously**...so **powerfully** to deliver them from Egypt and protect them and provide for them, how shockingly and pathetically quickly did they give up on Him!

Of course, the problem was they didn't realize that it was **God**, and **not** Moses, who'd done all that for them, and so even if Moses **had** expired up there on the mountain, God did not expire with him. Just as God provided Moses, so would He have provided Israel with another leader.

But the people didn't grasp that important detail, so they did, again, what so many who trust ultimately in themselves for their provision do: they took it upon themselves to provide for themselves...and right there is the real problem.

God was firmly in control of all that was going on, but the people would not wait for Him, so they tried to do for themselves what only God could do, and in so doing, they replaced the one true God with that which was not God.

They made an idol.

Now, in this instance, it was an actual creation of gold shaped in the form of something, but idols aren't always that. Idols are anything we put in the place of God and then expect to do for us what only God can actually do.

We make idols of ourselves...

we make idols of our jobs, our talents and our retirement accounts...

we make idols of our education, of our parents, some make idols of our children and a hundred other things...and when we do that, everything about life gets turned upside down.

We wind up misusing the gifts God's given us...

people become objects to be used and abused...

we exalt...we value the wrong things...

we worship creation, power, and productivity...and worst of all, God is reduced or rejected.

Here, **God** is the one who had given Israel *all that gold...all the wealth of Egypt*...and they took that and used it to create something that would give them absolutely nothing in return.

You see, that's how idolatry works, and that idolatry became the centerpiece of Israel's need for forgiveness.

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Now, there is much drama and discussion that goes on in the next few chapters between God, Moses, and the people.

Moses is furious when he sees what the people did and he smashes the commandment stones.

God is angered and for a time refuses to go with Israel on to the promised land...which, thankfully, produces in the people and in Moses the best possible response...great grief and sorrow and repentance.

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Now, let me mention...God's reaction...His declaration that He would not go with Israel anymore...that may suggest that He doesn't care about them.

But actually...just the opposite is true.

God wants to bless and lead Israel, but God knows His own holiness and purity well enough to know that, unless the people have a great change of heart, His own character would wind up destroying them.

He didn't want to destroy the people. It's just that you can't have sin and holiness together in one place and both survive. Wherever they do come into contact, sin will always be crushed by God's holiness. God knows that about Himself. The people don't understand.

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It's like fire and paper. [*Illustrates with paper lighted from a burning candle.*] Anytime the flame of God's perfection gets close to the dryness of our sin, this is what happens. The paper goes away, and the fire remains.

God knows this, and so for **Israel's own sake** ... for the sake of their existence..., God says He'll stay away and that they should stay away from Him. [*For safety, the flame is extinguished in a bowl of water on the pulpit.*]

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But...repentance comes!

Between the people's mourning over what they did and Moses' repentance on their behalf, God's forgiving nature is able to overcome and He chooses to continue on in relationship with them.²

² Exodus 33:4

So God calls Moses up the mountain again to reestablish contact...to restore relationship...and even to recreate the commandment stones that Moses destroyed.

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You see, this great gulf of sin separated God from Israel.

Yet all God needed was the sign of real repentance, and He jumps to make up the space; God jumps to fill the gap so relationship could be restored.

That's how much God wants to be with us.

His own holiness and purity – the fire that is Him...that limits what He can do...how close He can be to us because simply by who He is, He'll destroy whatever is not pure and holy like Him.

But it's never been His will to destroy us. Before our sin, He walked with joy with Adam and Eve in the garden, and believe it or not, God wants just that sort of relationship with every person alive.

It's His will to make us holy like Him...like He made us to be in the first place...all for the sake of relationship.

This is why He says what He does to Moses about Himself there in verses 6 and 7, ***“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”***

These marks of God's character are mentioned more than any others in Scripture. They're quoted eight times in the Old Testament; and several other places allude to them.<sup>3</sup>

You see, this is not a God who's out to get people. This is not a God who's just looking for us to do something wrong so he can wipe us out. If that were so, as John Oswalt writes...the people of Israel would have ceased to exist the morning they danced around their golden bull.<sup>4</sup>

No...this is a God who will go to any length possible to make relationship with us a reality.

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At the same time, God also wants us to understand that, even though He's a god of forgiveness, sin still carries consequences.

We can't just say, “Well, since God will forgive me, I'll go ahead and sin and ask for forgiveness later and it will be as if I never did anything.”

That's simply not so, which is why God adds there in verse 7, ***“Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”***

God's punishment is not some arbitrary act of someone who has been offended. God's not a monster who says, “If you cross me, I'll get your kids!”

³ Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Numbers 14:18, Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3; Nehemiah 9:17; Jonah 4:2., Exodus 20:5.

⁴ Oswalt, John. Exodus – Cornerstone Commentary. Tyndale. 2011. 538

No, He is a creator who, in freedom, does not prevent natural consequences from playing themselves out...and sin always has consequences. Sin always sets into motion a whole series of effects that ripple out like a rock that's thrown into water.

The alcoholic may well be forgiven and even delivered from addiction, but his children's ways of relating and trusting, and most likely *their* children's ways of relating and trusting will almost always be affected.

An abusive mom will almost always produce children who are, themselves, given to being abusers.

God does not stop the law of cause and effect...*but*...He *does* limit it's reach to just a couple generations.

In His grace, He does not let sin's ripples go on forever.

At the same time, verse 7 says His love carries on to a thousand generations!

In just that contrast, we can see where God's heart really is!

What tremendous gifts do we give to the generations to come every time we decide to do things God's way! We can't even know...we'll not live to see, on this earth, the blessings we give to those who come after us for our choosing to listen to God and to obey Him.

This is God's loving, patient, compassionate, gracious, long-suffering and forgiving character. He's always asking, "How can I bless my people? How can I improve their lives? How can I be closer to them? How can I limit their suffering? How can I walk with them, again, forever? How might I forgive them?"

Now, all this was possible, to a limited degree, through the sacrificial system...the bulls and goats and priests and blood and all that. With much work and ongoing sacrifice, sin *could be* atoned for.

But there was no power to make it *last*.

There was no power to actually change peoples' character to match God's character.

That ultimate and final answer came in Jesus.

At just the right time, God sent His Son to make possible, *forever*, the forgiveness and restoration and relationship with us that had always been in His heart.

He sent Jesus to make the way to what He'd always wanted: relationship with us...for us to know Him and walk with Him...through forgiveness.

He's *that willing* to give Himself to us, but we have to take Him as He is.

He cannot and will not change His holy character, but there is this remarkable forgiveness that makes relationship possible.

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Do you know the forgiving nature of God the Father, or do you see Him as some mean old man in the sky?

I hope all this this morning challenges that perception and deepens what is right about Him.

Do you believe God's nature is to forgive?

Will you believe it?

If you will, it will change the way you think about God the Father...

About what He's about...

what He's out for...

and **why** He can be **trusted**.

After all, God the Father's forgiving nature is why Jesus came. God sent Him...because God wants to forgive.

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If you find that you need to re-think your perception of God as Father, begin that journey even today, would you? He wants us to know Him as He reveals Himself here. He is, "***The Lord, the Lord! The compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.***"

In response to that declaration...that revelation of God's character, verse 8 tells us that, "***At once, Moses bowed to the ground and worshiped.***"

Shouldn't we do the same?

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A woman took her good friend with her to have her picture professionally taken. They stopped at the beauty shop first, but frankly saw limited success.

At the studio, she took her seat, and while the photographer was adjusting his lights and equipment, the woman said to him, "Now be sure to do me justice."

At that, her friend, with a twinkle in her eye, said, "My dear, what you need is not justice...but mercy."

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Our need is just the same and God knows this and He wants us to know that His character is one of mercy, grace and **forgiveness**...so we might live in relationship with Him and He with us.

How remarkable is that?

How amazing is our forgiving God!

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I don't have to tell you that forgiveness is a huge need in our world today...on every level.

I will tell you that at the end of each of these messages through Lent, there will be an opportunity for any who will to come and ask God for help in anything having to do with forgiveness.

Maybe it has to do with God forgiving you,

maybe it has to do with you forgiving someone else,

maybe it has to do with someone else forgiving you,

maybe something God is saying to you about Himself or about forgiveness in general...  
maybe something different.

If you'd like to respond to Him at the altar, know this: no one will bother you. If you'd like someone to pray with you, just catch the eye of one of the pastors and we will, but if not, we'll leave you to be alone with the Lord.

He has a lot He'd like to teach us about forgiveness, about His forgiving nature, and about how we can share in that.

I invite you...all through this season of Lent starting here this morning...to take that which He has to give, and listen to what He has to say, and to learn about His heart for forgiveness.

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Closing Prayer: Lord, we thank you for what You did, not just for us, but for Your people all these years ago. You had every reason to wipe them out right there and then...all of them. They were not worthy of walking with You. They were not worthy of Your leadership.

But, Lord, you made them, and you made us, to walk in relationship with you. And you want nothing more than for that to happen. You made a way for forgiveness. So, Lord, would you help us to learn forgiveness...your way of forgiveness...your character of forgiveness...so that we might be like you in forgiving...to have a forgiving nature.

Lord, if you'd like to speak to us...each of us individually about something, would you have the freedom to do that and help us to hear from you all that you want to share with us about your nature. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Closing Song: "Great Is Their Faithfulness"

Closing Word & Benediction: Again, if you'd like to come and just listen to the Lord here, you are welcome. This will become a quiet place after everyone leaves.

In these days of preparation for Jesus' resurrection, may God teach us about, and may He help us all to share more deeply, His own forgiving nature.

Thank you for coming to worship this morning.

The Lord bless and keep you. Amen

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