

The God Who Relents

Exodus 32

Introducing the theme

A personal comment

I want to begin tonight's talk by letting you into a secret.

You see, the chapters of the Bible that we are looking at tonight and next week are very special to me. These passages are high on the list of passages from the Bible that have shaped my life in some personal way.

The passages we are going to look at have been incredibly formative in my understanding of what God is like.

They have shaped my understanding of how he relates to us and how we relate to him.

My hope is that as we look at these chapters over the next two weeks that these passages will similarly transform your understanding of God.

With this in mind, let's get underway.

Theism

I want to start by talking about a philosophical term.

The term is 'Theism'.

In the world of philosophy and Christian theology, the term 'theism' is used in a couple of ways.

- (1) To refer to belief in God.
- (2) To describe a philosophical system represented by the intersection of the Hebrew-Christian scriptures and Greek philosophical traditions. In other words, it is used to refer to a particular set of beliefs formed by the marriage of Jewish and Greek thought.

A well known Evangelical scholar, Jim Packer, defines theism using ten characteristic beliefs (see OHP).

A theist believes that...

- God is personal and triune.
- God is self-existent and self-sufficient.
- God is simple, perfect, and immutable (= unchangeable).
- God is infinite, incorporeal, immense (= measureless), omnipresent, omniscient, and eternal. (i.e. he is not bound by any of the limitations of time and space that apply to us, his creatures, in our body-anchored existence. Instead, he is always present everywhere, really though invisibly and imperceptibly, and is at every moment cognizant of everything that ever was, or shall be, or now is.)
- God is purposeful and omnipotent: he has a plan for the history of the universe he made, and in executing it he governs and controls all created realities.
- God is both transcendent over the world and immanent in his world. (i.e. On the one hand he is distinct from the world, does not need it, and exceeds the grasp of any

created intelligence that is found in it, yet on the other hand he permeates it in sustaining and new-creating power, shaping and steering it in a way that keeps it on its planned course in a steady and stable state.

- God is impassable, which means that no one can inflict suffering, pain, or any sort of distress upon him.
- God is love: that is to say, giving out of goodwill, for the recipient's benefit, is the abiding quality both of ongoing relationships within the Godhead and of God's primary outgoings in creation and to his creatures.
- God's ways with mankind, as set forth in the Scriptures, show him to be both awesome and adorable by reason of his truthfulness, faithfulness, grace, mercy, patience, constancy, wisdom, justice, goodness, and generosity.
- God uses his gift to mankind of language to tell us things directly in and through the words of his spokespeople – prophets, apostles, Jesus, the writers of Scripture, and those who preach the gospel.

There are a great many hymns that reflect classical theism.
You can find a good example in a hymn by Faber (BCP 370).
Listen to it...

*My God, how wonderful thou art,
Thy majesty how bright!
How beautiful thy mercy-seat,
In depths of burning light!
How dread are thine eternal years,
O everlasting Lord!
By prostrate spirits day and night,
Incessantly adored.
How wonderful, how beautiful,
The sight of thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
And awful purity.
O how I fear thee, living God,
With deepest, tenderest fears!
And worship thee with trembling hope
And penitential tears.
Yet may I love thee, too, O Lord,
Almighty as thou art,
For thou has stooped to ask of me
The love of my poor heart.
No earthly father loves like thee,
No mother, e'er so mild,
Bears and forebears as thou hast done
With me, thy sinful child.
Father of Jesus, love's reward,
What rapture will it be,
Prostrate before thy throne to lie,
And gaze and gaze on thee!*

One Biblical text in particular has been used as a statement affirming some of the key tenets of theism: Exodus 3.14.

Perhaps you might remember Exodus 3:14.

It is the place where God meets Moses at the burning bush.

And...

¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (ESV)

The great Fourth Century theologian, Augustine, said that this verse proved that God was in essence unchangeable.

The Medieval theologian, Aquinas, claimed it indicated that God's essence and existence was identical.

Well, tonight I want us see how theism stands up to what we see in another part of the book of Exodus. Let's see what God has to tell us about himself in Exodus 32.

Exodus 32

Now, the way we are going to proceed is that I am systematically going to work through the passage and just draw out the details of what happens.

But before we do that, it is important to remember the context.

God has saved his people from Egypt.

He has given them his law.

And he has ratified his covenant with them.

In the chapters immediately preceding this chapter, he has given Moses instructions about the temple.

In other words, he has given Moses instructions about how God will make himself available to his people and how his people can avail themselves of this.

Now, in order to obtain God's instructions, Moses has been on Mt Sinai while the people wait at the bottom of the mountain.

It is in this context that the events of Exodus 32-34 happen.

Verse 1 tells us that the absence of Moses plays on the mind of the people.

The words for 'gathered themselves together' always carry a menacing nuance in Hebrew.

And it is with this menacing tone that the people come to Aaron and make their request.

The request is straightforward...

"Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

The Israelites were used to Moses being their mediator.

However, they are fed up with his absence.

This is implied by the disrespectful language they use of him – 'this Moses, the man who...'

The implication is that they feel that Moses has abandoned them.

So Aaron the priest says to them...

"Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

In all likelihood, the rings of gold being referred to here are the items that the Israelites were given by their neighbours when they left Egypt (11:2-3; 12:35-36).

Elsewhere in the Bible, earrings are often associated with foreign gods.

In other words, it is possible that the earrings are not just pieces of jewellery but items associated with the worship of other gods.

In any case, they take the rings and bring them to Aaron.

He shapes them into some sort of image.

The image apparently looks like a young ox or bull.

Throughout the Ancient Near East the bull was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy, and even fertility.

The bull was often deified and worshipped.

At other times, it served as a sort of pedestal on which the god stood.

This is probably what is going on here.

Aaron has fashioned a bull as the pedestal upon which the invisible God of Israel is imagined to be standing.

This is supported by verse 5 where Aaron proclaims a feast in honour of 'the LORD'.

In other words, it is still Yahweh, the Lord, who is being worshipped.

What they were wanting is not so much a new god but some visible symbol of him.

And when the image is finished the leaders of this plan announce to all the people...

"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

We are not sure what the plural reference to 'gods' is all about.

Nor should be think that the Israelites thought the golden calf was a god.

But the calf represented their gods or their God.

And what they are doing is shocking in the extreme.

They are turning against all that has happened to them.

They are taking the words of God who said, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt' and ascribing them to this newly fashioned god they have made out of their own imagination.

However, not only do they engage in false worship.

They also turn some other sacred institutions on their head.

The Passover meal was one conducted in deep solemnity and remembrance of God's rescue of them.

It was followed up by a meal on the mountain in the presence of God.

But now it is turned into a wild party of excessive eating, drinking, and playing.

The connotations of the words 'eat, drink, and rose to play' are those of orgiastic rites and sexual activity.

Aaron disappears from the scene and the rabble takes over.

With this, we come to verse 7.

Notice the words...

⁷And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

Throughout Exodus God has referred to the Israelites as 'My people'.

And he refers to their rescue as one in which he brought them out of the land of Egypt.

Not any more.

He is alienated from them.

They are not acting as his people and he seeks to distance himself from them.

Look at verse 9.

⁹And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.

In verse 1, the people of Israel referred disrespectfully to Moses as 'this Moses'.

Now God uses the same language to refer to his people.

They are 'this people'.

And this people are 'stiffnecked', which is a frequent Old Testament image of willful obstinacy.

Then, in verse 10, God draws his statement to a conclusion...

¹⁰Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

As the Israelites sought to turn around what God has done for them, so God himself seeks to turn back the clock.

Everything he had done for them was because of his love for them and because he remembered the covenant he made with them through their forefathers.

In Genesis 12 God had promised to make Abraham into a 'great nation'.

In Exodus he had fulfilled this by multiplying them in number and by rescuing them from the world power of the day.

But now, in frustration, he seeks to turn this aside and to make of Moses a great nation.

In effect, he is seeking to turn back on his promise to Abraham and his descendants and to make of Moses a great nation instead.

God is expressing his frustration and his desire to start again.

At this point, Moses steps in.

Throughout the book he has been a somewhat reluctant mediator between God and Israel.

He has also often been a bit self-centred in his approach.

But now he turns willingly to the task and puts the destiny of Israel at the forefront.

He demonstrates that in the process of the rescue from Egypt these people had indeed in some sense become 'his people'.

And so Moses pleads for his people before their God.

He implores God to not follow through with his expressed desire.

Look at his words...

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

Can you see what Moses is doing in his speech.

First of all, he is not letting God get away with distancing himself from his people.

The Israelites are not the people of Moses.

They are 'your people' whom 'you have brought out of the land of Egypt'.

And the events of the Exodus were designed to bring glory to God before the nations.

This glory will be under a huge cloud if the Israelites are destroyed.

But most of all, Moses will not allow God to not be God.

After all, what God has been about in Exodus is about keeping his word, keeping his promises to Abraham and the other patriarchs.

If he ditches the Israelites at this point, he will not be keeping his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom he swore an oath.

Implied behind all of this is a challenge to God to be really God and not a impotent golden calf.

And in the midst of this challenge comes the central request for God to do what no one but God can do.

Moses challenges God to turn from his fierce anger and act according to grace and mercy.

He urges him to relent, or to change his mind.

And God's response comes in verse 14.

¹⁴And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

We must not tone down what these verses say.

We must not tone down verse 10.

God is not pretending that he will destroy the nation.

He is not playing.

We have no grounds for not believing that he intends to do what he says.

He intends to destroy Israel, the nation he rescued out of Egypt.

And we must also not tone down what verse 14 says.
To relent means to change your mind.
Moses has given argument to God.
He has pleaded with God.
And he has been able to get God to alter his plans.
He has convinced God to change his mind.
And now, God will not destroy his people.
The rest of the story is straightforward.
Moses returns to the camp.
He sees what God had seen.
And, like God, he is enraged.
He deliberately breaks the stone tablets containing the words of the covenant.
Symbolically, he indicates that the covenant relationship between God and Israel has been broken by Israel.
God is well within his rights to walk away from the relationship.
Moses then receives an unsatisfactory and somewhat fudged report from Aaron as to what had happened.
Finally, order is restored through devout Levites taking the drastic action of executing judgment.
Three thousand people are killed on that day.
And then, in verses 30-35 Moses intercedes again for the people.
Conscious of the enormity of the sin committed, he seeks to make atonement (verse 31).
His request is refused – each individual will bear the punishment of his or her own sin.
But, as if to underscore the point that Moses had gained in his pleading with God, the Lord says to him...

³⁴But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you.

Now I need to say at this point that the story of these chapters is only half told at this point.
However, what I want to do now is to spend the rest of the sermon reflecting on what we have learnt from the part of the story we have read today.
We will hear the rest of it next week and there will be other things to learn from it.
So, let's stop and reflect for a moment.
There are a number of things I want you to notice.

Reflecting on the story

Theism, theologising, and listening

I want to spend some time thinking about the exercise of theology.
You see, traditionally Christian thinkers have divided the study of theology into a variety of different disciplines.
One of these disciplines is called the study of systematic theology or doctrine.
This is where people read the Bible and attempt to systematise what is found in the Bible.
So, they gather information from all through the Bible about what God has to say about various things like his character, the person of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the person of the Holy Spirit, etc.
Now, I think that the study of systematic theology is very important.
I think it is important to gather together whatever information we can about various topics.
Over the Christmas period we did that in a series of sermons.
For example, we looked at what the Bible had to say about the doctrine of the Trinity.
However, I need to say that Systematic theology also has some inherent dangers in it.

You see, it's fundamental desire is to fit things into a system.

And unfortunately not everything fits neatly into a system.

Even within the Bible there is a hint that we need to be careful with developing neat systems.

For example, I think that at least one goal of the book of Job is to warn against having neat theological systems that you force everything to fit.

Such systems can't always take everything into account.

Such systems sometimes have you calling a righteous man like Job unrighteous.

So, what has this got to do with our passage today?

Well, let's go back to our neat systematic definition of theism from the beginning of tonight's talk.

In trying to systematically represent the thought of the Bible three points were made...

- God is simple, perfect, and immutable (= unchangeable).
- God is infinite, incorporeal, immense (= measureless), omnipresent, omniscient, and eternal. (i.e. he is not bound by any of the limitations of time and space that apply to us, his creatures, in our body-anchored existence. Instead, he is always present everywhere, really though invisibly and imperceptibly, and is at every moment cognizant of everything that ever was, or shall be, or now is.)
- God is purposeful and omnipotent: he has a plan for the history of the universe he made, and in executing it he governs and controls all created realities.
- God is impassable, which means that no one can inflict suffering, pain, or any sort of distress upon him.

Now, the impression you get from Theism is that God has everything planned out to the minutest detail.

He is committed to this plan as a whole.

And he is committed to this plan in its detail.

And he will not change his mind on it.

More than that, the impression is also that he is not subject to any emotions or feelings.

But the plain meaning of the text we have read tonight brings this into question, doesn't it?

The rest of the Bible presents a picture of a God who is sovereign, who is in control of his world.

But passages such as this one warn us not to push these ideas too far.

You see, even though he is sovereign, he is open to influence.

He can be argued with.

He is prone to changing his mind.

He can regret past actions.

And he can become frustrated with his people.

All of these things are also true.

Our God is hardly the God of the philosophers.

He is hardly the distant, uninvolved, unmoved mover.

He is the present, hearing, seeing, active and caring God.

And, as we shall see next week, he is the God whose most common characteristic is to be overwhelmingly forgiving and merciful.

And all of this is a great comfort is you are his person, isn't it?

After all, this is a God you can talk to and confide in.

This is a God on whom you can cast your cares.

This is a God to know and love.

The potent pleading of Moses

The second point I want to make has to do with the effect that Moses has on God.

You see, as I read on through the Old Testament, I notice that the people of God often think that God will leave them.

They know that they have deserved judgment.

But they receive mercy and surprising love.

And we know it too.

For we know that there is an Israelite disposition in all of us...

A tendency to forget God's great mercy...

A disposition to turn his grace on its head...

A temperament of sinfulness and rebellion...

But we know that God commits himself to be faithful to us even though we are faithless.

We know that in Jesus Christ God comes to us and says, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'

The atonement that Moses could not make

And this brings me to my last point.

Do you remember the last section of the chapter when Moses attempted to make atonement for the people.

He asked if he might be blotted out of God's book for the sake of the people.

As it happened, God did not allow this exchange.

However, we know that he did allow it later.

We know that in Jesus Christ, God allowed one man to take the place of all sinful people.

What Moses was not able to do, the perfect man, Jesus Christ, was able to do.

And this means that we do not have to face the punishment ourselves.

We can be forgiven.

So, there's the first part of our story.

As you can see, there's some great things to learn about God here.

So make sure you are here for next week's instalment.

You see, we've only just scratched the surface this week.

Next week we get to the core of the matter.