

A Sinful People and a Holy God

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 27 September 2026, 16th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 32-34

Early on when Claire and I were dating I had some spectacular failures. Once I arrived at a date an hour and a half late. Needless to say, Claire was upset. I'd really let her down. Yet somehow, she managed to forgive me. I was an absolute goose, yet Claire managed to get past that.

This is our last sermon on Exodus and today we come to the heart of God's relationship with Israel, and the great crisis in the book of Exodus. The incident of the golden calf. If we were to picture this as a marriage, today we see it face its biggest threat. What will God do when Israel breaks faith with her husband? It's easy to love when things are going well – but true character comes out in the face of trials. And so it is that how God responds to Israel's unfaithfulness shows just who he is.

The story of God's relationship with Israel is also a story for us. God binds himself to them such that it is in this relationship that God will make himself known to the world. The God who reveals himself in their story is the same God who meets us in the Lord Jesus Christ. And when our relationships are under threat, it is in God, in his character and his love towards us, that we can find the resources to make our relationships work.

We'll be dipping in and out of chapters 32-34, so please do follow along in your Bibles. We'll trace the story in three points. Love scorned; the Lover's heart; and Love as strong as death.

Love scorned

We pick up the story in chapter 32 of Exodus. Israel is still at the foot of Mount Sinai. She has watched with awe as God descended upon the mountain in a cloud with thunder and lightning and trumpets. They have heard the voice of God speaking to Moses. They have just received God's commandments. They have promised 3 times, "we will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey" and the relationship has been confirmed by a sacrifice. Now they are waiting for Moses who has again gone up Sinai to receive the stone tablets with the commandments. We as readers know that God has been telling Moses all about how to build the tabernacle, so that he can live in the midst of his people.

But by the time we get to chapter 32, it's been 40 days and there has been no sign of Moses coming down. The people are getting restless. "Has the LORD abandoned us?" They take matters into their own hands – "Aaron, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron, perhaps trying to control the situation, obliges and makes a calf out of the gold they had plundered from Egypt. His efforts at finding a middle ground come undone. The festival to the LORD turns into an orgy. The supposed worship of Yahweh becomes a pagan festival. 40 days. That is all it took. 40 days and Israel has abandoned the LORD. 40 days and Israel can't wait to get its hands on another god.

But the LORD God sees their rejection, he sees them going wild, and his wrath flares up and he says to Moses, 32.7:

"Go down, because **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

"I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Is that it? Has Israel gone too far? Is the relationship over? Will God really make a fresh start with Moses?

As we continue it's as if God invites Moses to respond. And here, into the breach, steps Moses. He stands between the wrath of God and his rebellious people and seeks God's favour on their behalf. He intercedes before God for the people. Why should God relent? There is nothing in Israel that Moses can appeal to. And so he appeals to God's own character. He appeals to God's own name. "What kind of God will the Egyptians think you are if after bringing Israel all the way out to the mountains, you kill them?" "Remember *your* promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Turn from your fierce anger; relent and don't destroy *your* people."

And God does relent.

And that could be the end of this episode.

But it's not that easy. Israel's worship of the golden calf still threatens her relationship with God. And as the story unfolds we get to see just how serious Israel's sin is, and we get a glimpse of just what needs to be done, what God is prepared to do to preserve the relationship.

Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets of the covenant but when he sees what is going on, the calf, the dancing – his response mirrors God's. His wrath flares up and he smashes the tablets of the covenant. The relationship is broken. Aaron, who Moses left in charge, offers some cock and bull story about throwing gold into the fire and a calf just happening to come out. Moses, to show the people the seriousness of their sin and to restore order executes a mini judgment upon the people. This is mirrored by God who sends a plague because of the calf. But in between these acts of judgment once again Moses steps in before God (32.30-4):

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

So Moses went back to the LORD and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

The LORD replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."

Punishment is the first consequence of Israel's messing around with the golden calf, and here we come to the second. Moses is to lead the people to the promised land, but God will not go with them. God says,

"Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."¹

Israel's disobedience, her rejection of God, and her turning to other gods brings punishment and the withdrawal of God's presence. That is the threat at the heart of the relationship between God and his people. Israel has broken her promise to obey God, and has turned away to other gods. Will God keep his promise? Will he abandon her? Sure God hasn't destroyed her, but a trial separation isn't exactly what you'd call a healthy relationship. What about all the instructions for his tabernacle, his tent where he was supposed to dwell in the middle of Israel?

That tent hasn't yet been made. And the answer is found in another tent, a place where Moses does business with God. It's at this tent, outside the camp where Moses speaks with

¹ Exodus 33.3

God. And all Israel knows it, because the glory cloud comes down, and afterwards when Moses speaks to the people his face is shining, radiant with the afterglow of speaking with God. So intimate is his relationship with God that we read, “the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.”²

What does Moses say to God? If we keep reading from 33.12, He asks, “You want me to lead these people, but who is going to go with me? Remember they are your people.” God says,

“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

But Moses wants assurance:

“If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

God replies, “I’ll do what you have asked”.

Moses wants a final confirmation, so he asks,

“Please, show me your glory.”

The Lover’s heart

Here, we get to the heart of the book of Exodus and indeed the heart of the God of the Bible. God had shown himself to Moses in the burning bush. He had displayed his power through the plagues in Egypt at the Red Sea. But now, now God opens up his heart. Here he shows his glory. And his glory is his goodness. The Lover’s heart is on display.

33.19-23

And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 20 But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. 22 When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

² Ex 33.11

So Moses ascends the mountain and with two new tablets, because the basis for the covenant, the guarantee that God will not abandon Israel, the reason he will keep his promises, is who God is:

34.5-9

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 fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

Here at the heart of this revelation of the character of God the tension of his relationship with Israel is revealed. His compassion and grace, his love and faithfulness are confronted with the sin of his people. And as the relationship is renewed, as God writes the covenant anew, there is one picture which captures the essence of his love for his people – that of a husband for a wife. Here again, in 34.12-17, Israel is warned not to fool around with the gods of the nations. Don't be seduced by them. Don't whore after them. Don't make idols. Verse 14:

Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Now when I hear that God is a jealous God a whole bunch of images spring to mind: that he is vindictive, harsh, cruel, repressed, a killjoy. So often human jealousy is like that: petty, selfish and corrosive to relationships. Jealousy is being protective of what is yours. Now often we do that really badly, and we hurt others, but sometimes jealousy is good and sometimes we can actually get it right.

In writing about this passage, one commentator tells the story of his close friend. Her husband had been having an affair with a younger woman and had even conceived a child with her. Friends urged her to leave him. But in the midst of tears and overwhelming grief with a steely determination she said, "I will not share my husband with another woman. I will not let him abandon me and the children. I will do whatever it takes to win him back." And through patience, determination and incredibly costly forgiveness she did.

Can I suggest that this woman was reflecting God's jealous love. As we trace the story of God's relationship with Israel we see that this is what his love for her is like. In the face of her repeated infidelities God still pursues her. He will not abandon her. He does whatever it takes to win her back. He has bound himself to her and wants her love in return. He is a husband who so loves his bride that he will not share her. He loves her and wants her good. He is jealous for her affections because he has blessings on offer for her and they are only found in his embrace. He knows all other lovers will fail her, and so he will fight for her even against herself when she is seeking her own undoing.

Here, at Sinai, Moses does business with God on behalf of the people. God will go with his people, he will not abandon them. But it's not because of anything in Israel: she is stiff-necked and rebellious. No, it is because of who God is: gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, forgiving wickedness and rebellion. God rewrites the covenant on the new stone tablets, and Moses descends from Sinai to the people and the stage is set for the building of the tabernacle.

And yet there are unresolved threads in this story, hints at something more... intercession, atonement, forgiveness. Yes God will go with his people, but it is unclear whether their sin has been dealt with. And as Israel's story unfolds, it becomes more and more clear that the issue of the people's sin runs very deep and always threatens to destroy the relationship.

But if Israel's story highlights the problem of sin, it also shines the spotlight on the jealous love of God. His pain at his people's sin, and his faithful and unwavering desire for them to return to him.

Love as strong as death

In the Song of Songs, that love poem at the centre of the Old Testament we read:

*Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.³*

This is what God's jealous love for his people is like: as strong as death, as unyielding as the grave. And this is where God is prepared to go to bring his people back.

There was another time when God laid bare his heart, when his faithful love and compassion met the great sin of humanity. Another time when God met the representative of his people

³ Song of Songs 8.6

outside the city. But this time, the tent was a body. This time, the representative made atonement for the people's sin and interceded for them, saying "Father, forgive them." And he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Do you see love as strong as death? Do you see jealousy unyielding as the grave?

God does not forget or abandon his people. His love will not allow sin, death or the devil to have the final word. He acts to win his people back, even at the cost of his beloved Son. And wonderfully, in Jesus, God himself acts. The Son willingly gives himself to win his bride.

In Ephesians we read: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... to make her holy... and to present her to himself ... radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."⁴

This is the jealous love of God, that will move heaven and earth to bring his people to himself. If you want to know what God is like, look here: God in the flesh, dying at the hands of humanity, yet dying for humanity. If you want to know whether God loves you, don't look first at whether life is going well, whether you're well off, or whether you are getting what you want. Look here—at God's arms stretched out to embrace you, with your name engraved on his palms.

Why do we need to hear this?

First, if you believe you have done something God could never forgive, look here. Atonement has been made. Hear Christ interceding: "Father, forgive them." If you feel dirty, tainted or unlovable because of what has happened to you, hear again of Christ's love. He does not accept you because you are already pure and lovely; he loves you and gives himself for you, washing you clean and making you holy.

Second, we need this word because forgiveness is at the heart of life—with God and with one another. When others hurt or disappoint us, or when we hurt others, we need resources beyond our own strength. In Christ, God offers his patience, compassion, forgiveness and grace.

So bring your wounds, failures and relationships to God. Ask for healing, forgiveness and the grace to forgive. As you slowly and imperfectly extend that grace to others, you will begin to reflect the glory of God and the image of his Son to the watching world.

⁴ Ephesians 5.25-27

Moses caught a glimpse of the glory of God – his goodness, his compassion, his faithfulness, his forgiveness, his justice, his jealous love. In the face of the most grotesque of sin, humanity rising up to kill God, we have seen the fullness of that glory on display in the broken body of Jesus, God in the flesh, arms outstretched in love, your name engraved upon his palms. This is his goodness, this is love as strong as death, this is what God does to have you as his own. Why would you settle for anything less?