

SUMMER 8 - The God Who Repents

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[0 : 0 0] If you came across someone who'd never heard of Donald Bradman, what would you say about him? If you were asked to write a few words about him that were to go on a plaque or a tombstone commemorating him, what would you say about him? And if someone wanted to see him in action, where would you direct them to go? What could they watch? What place in Australia could they go in order to learn some more about him? And now let's think of someone who is not so much famous but infamous. I want you to think about Adolf Hitler. What do you know about him? What makes his name so well known? What distinguishes him from other human beings and how would you describe him?

And if you came across someone who'd never heard of Adolf Hitler, what would you say about him? If you were asked to give two sentences that summarised him, what would those two sentences say? And if you wanted to tell someone where to go and see him in action, where would you direct them to go? What could they watch? What place in the world could they go in order to learn?

And then let's think about the ordinary people, yourself, myself. What makes you who you are? What distinguishes you? What would others, how would others describe you? And if you were asked to write a few words for your own tombstone, what would you say? If someone wanted to see you in action where they could see who you are, where would you direct them to go and what could they look at?

Now lastly, I want you to think about God. What is the God of the Bible like? What makes him who he is? What distinguishes him from other gods? How would you describe him? If you were to tell one story from the Bible that captured him, what would it be? Friends, the passage we are going to look at today is one of the key passages in the Old Testament in terms of understanding God. And it describes God in two ways. First, it tells a story about God. And second, it contains some brief sentences where God describes himself to his people. And both the story and the sentences, in my view, agree in what they say about God. And you could almost summarise it, I think, in one word. So today we're going to learn some things about God because this passage contains some marvellous things. We're going to learn what, find or find out what makes God special, what makes him tick, what distinguishes him from other gods.

It is an exciting prospect and it's exciting passage. So let's have a look at it today. So let's start with a story that can be found in Exodus chapter 32 and 33. These are long chapters.

[2 : 4 8] And so I need to summarise the story for you. And that's what we're going to do. You might remember where we are. The book of Exodus began with God's people under the cruel rule of Pharaoh in Egypt.

And they cry out to God. And God hears the cry of his people and he sees their trouble and he comes down to rescue them and to bring them up through the hand of Moses from the land of Egypt through a series of spectacular signs and wonders. And the last one of those wonders occurs when they march through the Red Sea as though it's dry land. And when Pharaoh's armies try to follow, the sea consumes them and God brings them to Mount Sinai. And that brings us to about where we are. God meets with them.

He enters covenant with them. They pledge obedience to him. The elders of Israel go partway up the mountain and actually see God. Then the glory of God settles on the mountain. Looks like so the whole mountaintop is just like a consuming fire. And God beckons Moses to come up the rest of the way. And he does.

He stays there for 40 days and 40 nights receiving instruction from the Lord. And that brings us to chapter 32. And the story of what happens here is incredible. When the people of God see that Moses is delayed, they begin to get a little fidgety and they begin to wonder if something's happened to him.

They also begin to wonder about God. And so they ask Aaron to make some gods for them. And have a look at verse one. You can see them doing this. They gather around Aaron and they say, come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses, I love that term, this fellow Moses, who's been with them a long time, doing lots of stuff with them. But he's this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt. We don't know what has happened to him. And verse two says that Aaron gets them to pull their ornaments and then fashions them into a goat, the gold into an idol in the shape of a calf.

[4 : 40] And they proclaim that this is the God who brought them up out of Egypt. I hope you noticed in that little story, it's a wonderful little story that later on Aaron will say, well, I just threw the stuff into the fire and out came this calf. Anyway, look at verse five. Aaron builds an altar and he announces a great celebration. And in verse seven, the scene changes. You see, we've been at the base of the mountain and with the people. And now we go back up to the top of the mountain with God and Moses.

And God tells Moses what is going on down below. He informs Moses that he's inclined to act and totally wipe out the people in his anger and just push ahead with Moses alone. Look at verse 10. God says, now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and I may destroy them. And then I'll make you into a great nation. I think the leave me alone is, you know, don't say anything to me. I just want to get on with it. Let's, I will do it. And now look at verse 11 to 13. Moses is clearly horrified.

He intercedes and he argues two things up front. First, verse 11, that he argues that should God save Israel only then to turn around and destroy them. He says, you know, something wrong with that.

Why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Second, he says, verse 12, why should he give the Egyptians opportunity to gloat?

Why should the Egyptians say, he says, it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth. And then in verse 12, he begs God to turn away his anger and he pleads with him to remember the covenant he has with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[6 : 23] And after, and after all, he says, this whole thing, or he intimates this whole thing began back in chapter two with God remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And so what he's saying is, how can you forget that? You've, you remembered it back then. How can you forget? No, Moses says, be consistent. Or this is what by impact he's saying, be consistent with what I know of you.

And so he urges him to relent on the basis of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom he swore an oath by his own self. Now friends, let me tell you just a few things about what is going on here. First, the word or the words for turn from is often used in scripture for repentance.

Second, the word relent here means to feel regret about something or pain. It has therefore the sense of exactly what it says, relent, or perhaps even change your mind. So the combination of the words repent and relent is very strong. Moses is asking for a very deep change of decision. It is very bold. I think it is audacious. That'd be my word for it. It's on the edge of being blunt.

However, Moses has lots of ground for his request. You see, first, God has brought him into his presence in a way that he's brought no other person in history into his presence. Second, he has revealed his nature to Moses. God is the God of his word. And he knows that God has given a covenant word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he knows that remembering this covenant is what the exodus has been all about. Anyway, the bold bluntness of Moses pays off. Look at verse 14. It says, then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. That is, he listens to Moses and he changes his mind.

He relents from wiping out his people. Now, I love this little interplay with about relenting. You see, think about it this way. Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that he'd make him into a great nation. Here, God says, actually, I'm going to diminish them. They won't be a great nation. Moses intercedes and says, will you relent? And God does relent. And so in doing so, he actually acts according to his known will. He continues to make descendants of Abraham a great nation. But I want you to notice something else.

[9 : 00] Did you notice that as we read through the passage, that sin has consequences? You can see it here in this passage. A number of the people of Israel die at the hand of Moses and the tribe of Levi. Others die because God sends a plague. But God does relent from what he had said to Moses. He said to Moses, I'm going to wipe a lot of you out, except for you, Moses. And a small number are punished.

God does remain committed to his people. He does remain committed to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now let's go to chapter 33. We notice there are still some outstanding issues in chapter 33. The first issue arises in verse 1. You see, throughout the book of Exodus, God has referred to the people of Israel as my people, my people. Have a look at verse 1. In Exodus 32, remember, they sinned against him, broke covenant. Now look at how God identifies Israel. Can you see it in verse 1?

No longer is Israel called my people. They are called the people. And no longer are they the ones God brought out of Egypt. They are the ones Moses brought out of Egypt. Fundamentally different, isn't it? However, they are still inheritors of an oath that have been given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants. In other words, God is still their God. But the covenant has been breached, broken by sin. And the problem is emphasised by verse 2. Can you see verse 2? God does not promise to go with his people. He doesn't even promise. Here's a very little interesting twist. He doesn't even promise that the angel of God will go with them. As he said in Exodus 14 verse 9. He promises that just an angel will go before them. And then in verse 3, he makes himself clear. He is not going with them.

He can't go with them because they are sinful by nature and further sin in his presence would only incur further judgment. So in one sense, he's being protective of them. And then in verse 4, we're told of the people's reaction. They are absolutely shattered. Then they're told to strip off their ornaments. Of course, these ornaments were reminders, weren't they, of the gold trinkets they used to make the idol out of. And now they're to go without ornaments, without their false gods that they created, that they would go without the immediate presence of the real God. It's a terrible situation, isn't it?

You haven't got any of the remnants of the false gods. You haven't got the real God going with you. Now they go to verse 7. You remember that in Exodus 25 to 31, God had given instructions to Moses about building a tabernacle. We looked at that last week. That tabernacle would be the symbol of God's abiding presence in the midst of his people. But you've got to remember the tabernacle has not actually been built yet. It'll be built after this. But Moses has this sort of very portable alternative of some sort. He has this tent that is pitched outside the camp of Israel. It's a sort of private tent of meeting with God. Now there's no priest, no cult, no ritual that we know of. It's simply a place where Moses can meet with God. And in the plain sight of all the people, remember it's outside the camp. It's not accessible to everyone else in one sense. In plain sight, God would come to him. They were without the presence of God, but Moses is immersed in the presence of God.

[12 : 32] And there in the tent, God would speak to Moses face to face. You see, here's Israel, isolated, alienated from God. And they'd come to Moses and speak to, and God would come to Moses and speak to him face to face as friends speak to each other. And verse 12 gives us an example of the sort of face to face conversations that occurred between God and Moses. So have a look at it. Verse 12. The one that's recorded is the issue of God's presence. And Moses starts by remembering that he is the one to whom God says, I know you by name and you've found favour in my sight. Now the only other person in the Old Testament who is said to have found favour in God's sight is? Noah. Okay, no one else in the Old Testament is said to know God by name, but Moses does. The relationship between Moses and God is incredibly special. And on the basis of this relationship, Moses asked for a particular consideration or two. First, he says, I want to know your ways. In other words, I want to know your essential personality. I think that's it. That's what it means. What makes you tick? What are you at your heart, as it were? He desires a full understanding of what guides God's actions in the world? What controls the way you work? What lies at the core of his being? That's the first thing, to know God's ways. But there's a second thing he wants from God. Can you see it in those verses?

He wants God to remember that Israel is his people, not Moses's people, but God's people. In other words, what Moses is asking for is for God to restore relationship with Israel. He wants God to be their God and them to be his people. And in verse 14, God responds. He neatly answers Moses' first desire. He will go with Moses and we'll give him rest. But Moses wants more. And verse 15 spells it out. He doesn't want God to go with him. You see, God said, I'll go with you, Moses. No, he says, no, no. He wants it to be an us. And in verse 17, God agrees. Look at it. Verse 17. And the Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name. Anyway, in verse 18, there's a third request. He requests that he might be shown God's glory. Let me explain a little bit about glory in the Old Testament. Glory is the thing that makes someone shine. Okay. That's what glory is, isn't it? It's the thing that makes things shine. The thing that you can see, the thing that makes them particular. And so that is what is happening here. What Moses is asking for is to see God's very self. He's asking to see the thing that makes God shine. The thing that makes God, God. And God's response is recorded in verse 19. Moses asked to see the very self of God. And God tells Moses that his goodness will pass before him. He'll make known to Moses the core of his being, which is the free giving of benevolence, mercy and grace. However, at the core of his being, God is God and humans can't know the depths of God's glory. So God's going to shield him from the absolute glory of his presence.

So there's the story in action. It's a long story and I hope you've got the thrust of it. Let's summarize where we've been. First, what does this passage tell us? It tells us about both God and human beings. What do we learn about human beings from this passage? Well, first, it tells us a sobering truth. What is the sobering truth? It tells us humans are full of wickedness. You see, they have just seen this most spectacular deliverance by God. They have received the 10 words. They have agreed that they will keep every word God utters. But in just somewhere under 40 days, they have solidly broken at least the first command, two commandments. And if revelry means what it normally means in the Old Testament, there are a few others they've broken as well.

They've shattered relationship with God. They have demonstrated they're no different to Adam and Eve. They are made of the same stuff. They are sinful rebels. Now let's see what we learn about God from this passage. The first thing this passage shows us is that God is just. He's ended relationship with his people. He's shown them what that means. When they break relationship, what does he do? He justly responds. He rightly threatens to meet their disobedience with his judgment.

His people freely volunteered. We will worship you. We'll do everything that you say. But at first flush, they have replaced him with something made of metal. And God is just.

[17 : 25] He's justly angry. And we learn something else about God here. You see, we learn that his mercy and love overcomes his judgment. And Moses banks on that. He pleads with God, don't do it. Turn back from judgment. Don't wipe them all out. Let your mercy triumph over judgment. And God demonstrated that this was his inclination. Moses had it right. He relented from sending judgment. His love overwhelmed.

And so there's a story, what it tells us about humans and about God. Humans are sinful. God is just. But God is a God whose love also triumphs. So now before we go on, I need to speak a little bit about God relenting. So here's the tricky part of it all. Okay, so here's a number of things for you to go home and think about. Scripture often talks about God relenting. So we need to understand what it means when we think about this. So let me run these things by you. First, and this is very important. We must not try to dodge or fudge what is being said here. Okay, God is not presented as pretending to relent in chapter 32. You don't get any impression this is a pretense. Nor is his relenting presented as being anything less than anything less than exactly that. Presumably, that means that if Moses had not interceded, then what would God have done? He would have pressed on and done what he said he was going to do. And that's exactly what Psalm 106 says. Listen to it. Psalm 106. So he, that is God, said he would destroy them. Had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them. In other words, if Moses had done nothing, God would have exercised judgment.

Second thing to say, my observation is that in nearly every case where God changes his mind in scripture or relents about something that's coming in the future, it is either because someone has changed their actions, that is, they've repented, they've changed, or someone has interceded on their behalf such as Moses does here. Third, whatever else this relenting does, it shows that God takes Moses into account in his actions. Please hear me on this, it's very important. We are not told how this can be, but we are told that this happens. If Moses said nothing, presumably God would have executed his promise to destroy his people. Okay, chapter 34. Remember what happened? Moses asked God to show him his glory, the thing that makes him shine. God agrees. God says, I'll make my goodness pass before you and proclaim my name, disclose his character. In other words, that's what happens in chapter 34.

And so what happens is this, two more stone tablets are made. Moses hikes back up the mountain. God descends in the cloud, reveals his name and character. And look at verses 6 and 7.

They are the famous words where he announces his person and his character. Look at them. The Lord, the Lord, that is Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, 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 the fourth generation. And friends, I want you to notice what these verses say. Allow these words to imprint yourself, themselves upon your memory. I have them, like I said, you know, in my, the other day to you, in my Bible software, my Bible software opens up at these verses because of the importance of them. And I like reading them because they reveal who God is and what his character is like. Not everything to say about God because the New Testament is yet to come, but they are potent and they undergird so much of what's in the New Testament. But these verses capture God's nature as seen in the story we've just gone through. Look closely at what they say. First of all, you'll see they use the special name for God, the Lord or Yahweh. Second, they tell us that this Lord is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. He's someone who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. Doesn't punish sin. But I want you to notice the contrast. He shows love to thousands.

[22 : 19] I think that implies thousands of generations and Deuteronomy will indicate that. But his judgment on sin is restricted to a few generations. Can you see the contrast? Thousands of generations generations for love and forgiveness. Three or four generations for judgment. His nature is overwhelmingly on the side of love, mercy and forgiveness. He will, of course, punish sin.

But as Isaiah says, his judgment is his strange work. He must do it because he is just. But if there's any way out of judgment, he will take it. After all, his nature is to have mercy and to exercise steadfast love. And God's people here in Exodus, when they hear those words from, well, when Moses hears those words, know it, knows it because he's just seen it in action. You see, God had every right to totally wipe out Israel. But he didn't. What did he do? He relented from sending judgment.

And in the closing verses of chapter 34, he will remake the covenant, which he had no obligation to do. Despite their sinful nature, he'll remain God and they'll remain his people.

Now, friends, you can summarize all of this in one word. Take a look at those verses again, chapter 34. And look at verse 6. God says that he abounds in love. Now look at verse 7.

Again, God says that he maintains love. And the word here for love is a Hebrew word. The word is *chesed*. It means God's unexpected, surprising, unobligated mercy and love. In other words, it's what you get from God when you least deserve it. It's what Israel gets from God in the golden calf incident.

[24 : 18] They didn't deserve what they got. They didn't. They weren't judged. But God didn't wipe them out. It's God's unexpected, surprising, unobligated mercy and love. And friends, that story, this story we've read tonight, this statement about God at the end of it, this word which summarizes God's character, shaped Israel's understanding of God. Time and time again in the Old Testament, they return to this story and they remember it. And they quote this statement or they allude to it. And they hang on it and they rely on it. So I want you to open your Bibles to the prophet Micah.

It's on page 934 if you're using a pew Bible. And I want to look at chapter 9, the very last few verses.

I want to look at verse 18. Sorry, chapter 7, verse 18. He says, Now listen to all the echoes of the story and the statement.

Who is God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy.

You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be faithful to Jacob and show *chesed* to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago.

[25 : 55] Can you see them going back and saying, this is what we know you to be. This is who you are. We know it's got to keep forging our history.

Now I want you to look at the book of Jonah. And you can find it on page 926 in your pew Bibles. Jonah 4. And now you might remember that in Jonah 3, God has relented, same word as in Exodus, from sending judgment on Nineveh, so a pagan nation.

And Jonah reflects on why he'd been so reluctant to go to Nineveh to preach to these Ninevites. Because they're sort of the worst nation, worst city. Okay, evil, incarnate.

And look at what Jonah says in verse 2 of chapter 4. He prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? Now we find out for the first time why he ran away.

That's why I tried to force, what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. You see, I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in *Chesed*, a God who relents from sending calamity.

[27 : 04] And what's worse, you see, for Jonah, is that he knew deep underneath that if God was like that, not even the Ninevites would be an exception. And he did not like it.

Friends, can you see what Jonah's doing in the combination that he does? Can you see it there? You're a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in Chesed, a God who, do you notice the conflation, relents from sending calamity.

That wasn't in the statement, that was in the story. So what he's doing is he's combining the story of Exodus 32 with the statement about God by himself in chapter 34.

And he's telling us story and statement are mutually interpretive. They inform each other. They head in the same direction. They tell us that a God who abounds in Chesed will inevitably be a God who's inclined to relent from sending calamity.

Jonah knew it. And Jonah's not the only one who does this sort of conflation of things. You'll find it in the prophet Joel as well. So, but let me put it another way.

[28 : 13] If you've been coming along in the mornings to hear Joel, you'll have remembered we did, we looked at this, but Exodus 32, the story is the background to Exodus 34. Having seen chapter 32, Moses will understand God when he reveals his character in chapter 34.

What's more, if God is Exodus 34, he will be doing Exodus 32. Does that make sense? Okay.

Now, if I'm right, if God's Chesed is at the core of his character, then you'd expect to see it appear in the New Testament, wouldn't you? And we do, although I need to say, obviously the word can't occur in the New Testament because it's written in Greek.

The Old Testament is written in Hebrew and Aramaic. But the idea is there everywhere in the New Testament. Do you remember the parable of the lost son? We call it the parable of the prodigal son. You remember the story?

A man has a son who persuades his father, who's still alive, to give him the inheritance before he dies. And then the son sells it off, spends it on profligate living.

[29 : 23] In the end, it's all gone and the son is destitute. Then the son remembers his father. He remembers the generosity of his father. And so he decides he'll return home.

And as he nears home, it is clear that his father has been keeping an eye open on that little road into that village, looking for his son. And he sees him from a distance.

And he's so overwhelmed for his son that he does a very undignified thing for an old man in that society. He picks up his skirts and he runs out to greet him. And he meets his son with unexpected, unobligated, surprising mercy and love.

And that love shows itself in him welcoming his son back and throwing a party for him. Friends, God is like that father. Only on steroids, if I could put it that way.

Friends, God is like that father. And every one of us who is a Christian knows that this is what God is like. After all, we know that we have sinned against God.

[30 : 28] We know we deserve God's judgment. But God meets our sin with his grace. In a surprising act of grace and mercy, he sends his son to take our sin upon himself on the cross.

And in the cross, God's mercy triumphs over his judgment. In the cross, God shows him to be the God of cassette. He acts in unexpected, unobligated, surprising mercy and love.

Friends, God's character of love and grace that we see in Exodus and principally see on the cross flows into every area of Christian existence.

When we sin yet again as we all do and we come and we bring our sins before God and we confess our sins, what does God do?

He acts with cassette. He acts with grace and he forgives us. In his grace, that same God gives us gifts to serve our brothers and sisters.

- [31 : 35] In his grace, he hears our prayers and he gives us more than we could ever imagine. As we approach his throne boldly in prayer, he gives us grace to help us in time of need.
- In his grace, he uses our weakness for his glory. It is by his grace that he indwells in us by his Holy Spirit. Friends, our God is the God of overwhelming love and grace.
- And we celebrate this when we say together the grace. Do you remember the grace? there from 2 Corinthians chapter 13? Sorry, from 2 Corinthians 13.
- It says, May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.
- Can you hear it? May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is his overwhelming kindness, mercy, forgiveness, forgiveness, the love of God and this remarkable thing, being in fellowship with God through his Spirit.
- [32 : 46] See, this is where we are and God's character of merciful grace is the guarantee of our future. The day will come when we will die or when history will end and on that day let me tell you, you will find yourself again surprisingly in the very presence of God.
- Just as the ancient Israelites found themselves surprisingly accompanied by God's presence as they moved on their way, we on that day will stand before God's throne clothed in white garments.
- By God's grace death will be defeated and we'll live with him forever. God's grace gave us salvation. God's grace justified us and God's grace will make us heirs of eternal life.
- Can you see what I'm saying? The story of the cross is the outworking of the nature of God we see in Exodus 32 to 34 and the New Testament equivalent words are love and grace.
- We are people overwhelmed by God's unexpected and obligated surprising love and mercy. Friends, that's our take home message for tonight. Our God is the God of Chesed the God of grace and we know that supremely by the because of the cross.
- [34 : 06] But there's one more little thing I want to say. Friends, I want you to remember Moses for a moment right back at the beginning of chapter 32. Remember who he is.
- He's been in the presence of God up on that mountain. He's the friend of God. He knows God by name. He knows God and God's purposes and he is here very bold in his asking.
- And yet, think about this for a moment, we too have been brought into the presence of God through the blood of Jesus Christ. We too are the friends of God. We too are the children of God.
- God, as it were, knows our name as well. we know God and we know God's purposes through Jesus. And yet, if I might say this at this point, our prayers are pitifully placid beside those of Moses.
- They are pathetically lacking in boldness. And so next Sunday, I'm going to have a one-off sermon introducing our year of prayer on being bold in prayer.
- [35 : 16] I'm going to address this very problem from a parable of Jesus. Friends, there's been a lot of content, but we needed to do it tonight. We needed to get these chapters right and these things said about God in our brains.
- You may have some questions for me, but we'll have opportunity for that in a moment. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your overwhelming mercy.
- Father, we thank you for being able to read about it in the Old Testament. we thank you mostly because we have seen it in the cross. We know that though we are totally undeserving, that you have brought us near to you and that we can boldly enter into your presence.

We thank you for this. We thank you that it is only because of Jesus that this is the case.
We thank you in his name. Amen. Thank you for Hat.