

## Does God Change His Mind?

Exodus 32:11-18

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Exodus, chapters 25 through 40, is a section that teaches Israel how to worship, how God is to be worshiped rightly, and in the middle, in chapter 32, we find this story about idolatry and infidelity to the living God. We've already noted that there are several huge themes that run throughout Exodus 32-34. First of all, this whole section highlights the person and importance of the Mediator. Without a Mediator, Israel would never have survived this incident, and so God's provision of the mediator was absolutely essential for the welfare and the continuance of the people of Israel.

Secondly, in this whole section, we see the doctrine of sin highlighted. Like the Fall Story, in the book of Genesis, like the various accounts of the rebellion of mankind against God, in the book of Genesis, we have here yet another account of God's people falling away from faithfulness to the Lord, and so the passage highlights the doctrine of sin. It shows us how insidious sin can be, even in the midst of a people who ought to have been grateful for the redemption that God had given them.

Also, we see this whole section not highlighting that Moses has a greater compassion than God has, not highlighting that Moses desires the people of God to be forgiven more than God desires to forgive them, but rather Moses embracing the compassion that God had been teaching. If you remember, when Moses was called as a mediator, first, his answer was, "This sounds great, God, send somebody else." Now, we see Moses as the only hope of Israel, stepping up to the plate when he was the only one who could step up to the plate for Israel, and he does it because he has a heart for compassion for God's people. What's happening here? Moses is not persuading his God to be compassionate and merciful; Moses is becoming like his compassionate and merciful God.

Finally, more than that, this passage draws attention to the fact that it is God's objective outside of us blessing, mercy, and grace, that is the ground of our security in our relationship with Him. If Israel's security and relationship with God had been based on their innate goodness and their behavior in this instance, we would not have the rest of the Old Testament to read about. It would have ended right there in exodus 32, and all the rest of your pages would have been blank,

regarding the history of Israel. Maybe it would have recorded the history of Moses' family, but the history of Israel would have been over, had it depended on Israel.

But one of the great themes that you see in this passage is God saying, 'The reason why this covenant is going to go on, is going to have nothing to do with your fidelity, and everything to do with My grace and My mercy. It's something outside of you that's going to save you, Israel.'" All of those things we see in this passage. With that as a little foretaste, let's look at God's word in Exodus 32, beginning in verse 11:

Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? "Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people. Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp." But he said, "It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; But the sound of singing I hear.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

*Lord God, help us to understand Your word. Speak to us of our own sin, our own need of a mediator. Open our eyes to see how this great passage regarding Your dealings with Your people of old, is just as fresh and applicable to those of us who have the privilege of being part of Your new covenant people. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In this great passage, you will see three parts. In verses 11-13, we find the details of Moses' intercessions, his prayer, and his mediatorial prayer to God. In verse 14 we find, and it's described in the most shocking form imaginable, God's response to Moses' prayer. And then in verses 15-18, we find the story of Moses making his way back to Joshua, and then Moses and Joshua making their way down the mountain to find out for themselves what is already going on in the

camp of Israel. I have a suspicion that I won't get to that third section, but those are the three sections of the passage which are before us, and I want to remind you where we are. Israel has grown impatient with waiting for Moses, for almost 40 days he had been on the mountain, and they've come to Aaron and they've said, "Aaron, make us a god, a representation of this god who brought us out of the land of Egypt." And they had demanded a replacement for Moses, a substitute, even an inanimate, impersonal mediator. They had rejected the very things that Moses had taught them, that they had heard from God's own mouths. And in the very midst of their revelry now, they had forgotten Him. And yet, my friends, think about it. Their lives, their future, their destiny, their hopes, their dreams, their children's future, all of those things were bound up with, and wholly dependent upon, the man whom they had forgotten and rejected in that hour. That's where we are when we get to Exodus 32:11, the people of God have forgotten the mediator that God gave them, but their only hope is the mediator they've forgotten.

### **I. Moses intercedes on behalf of Israel.**

Let's look first at verses 11 through 13, where we see this glorious mediation of Moses, when he intercedes on behalf of Israel. Moses boldly approaches the throne of grace in these verses, and it's one of the great ironies that in the hour of their forgetfulness, the man Israel needed most was Moses. And he was there for them even though they had rejected him and forgotten him. Moses the mediator, forgotten by his own people, is now taking action to the point of arguing against God's announced plan to bring judgment. So did he love the people of God, so did he love the glory of God, so was he committed to his role as the mediator, that he was ready to argue with God about His judgment against Israel. And yet, Israel is oblivious of their mediator, and they're certainly oblivious of the work that he is doing.

The parallel comes to mind of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is praying a prayer to enable Him to undertake the single, most important action ever undertaken in the history of the world, in the history of redemption, and His disciples are right there praying with Him. No. They're asleep.

Except, here in Israel it's worse. The people aren't just sleeping, they're not just failing to pray, they're playing. They're in the midst of an orgy. They're in the midst of a bacchanalian feast of idolatry. They're going after other gods, while the mediator is meeting with God to bring down His word to them and to establish them as His people. Have you ever thought of a more ironic scenario. The mediator interceding, the mediator pleading for God's mercy, even as the people of God are rejecting their God.

Is that not so often the picture of His people, though? It's not something in them that assures the continuation of His blessing. It's not their goodness, it's not their

faithfulness, it's His faithfulness to them, even when they fall. Is that not a glorious picture of God's gracious salvation. It's not based on something in us. It's not based on something that we do, and is it not a glorious picture of our Savior's redemptive mediation. What is transacted on the cross, has nothing to do with your goodness and my goodness. It has everything to do with the Mediator's interaction with the heavenly Father on the basis of His own perfect righteousness on our behalf. Now, in this passage, God is going to show you what a Mediator is for, and He's going to show you what a Mediator is for by showing you what Moses does, and it's quite remarkable.

The first thing we're told in verse 11, is that Moses *entreated* the Lord." Now, if you search that word, *entreat*, in the Old Testament, you will find it used in some very interesting situations. It is always an importunate plea to God for mercy, and Moses entreats the Lord. He does so boldly when God is most unapproachable. Look at what God says in Exodus 32:10, "Let Me alone so that My anger may burn and I may destroy them." He's already saying to Moses, 'Don't bother coming and entreating Me. I'm going to judge them.' And the first thing that Moses does is that he bursts through the door with an entreaty, a petition, a supplication, an intercession to God on behalf of his people. It's a marvelous thing to see.

So many pictures in the Scriptures come to mind. You have that picture of that young Jewish woman, in a strange eland, and she is the only hope of her people, and she is scared to death because if she walks through the door and the king doesn't acknowledge her, she's dead. And yet, with bravery she walks through that door, in hope against hope, that she will be received by the king for the sake of her people, and he receives her. She's bold. And here's Moses, and God said, 'Don't come in here,' and right in there he goes. Because it's the only place he can go. Where else can he go? It's the only hope I have, to go in there. And he goes in there boldly for the sake of Israel. Isn't this what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 3:12, when he talks about us having a liberty and a freedom and a boldness to go into the presence of God because of the work of Christ. That in Him we can approach God boldly. Moses is a picture of how God's people can approach God boldly, but of course, he is ultimately a picture of the great Mediator who approached God boldly at the throne of grace on our behalf.

That's the first thing. Moses goes in boldly, even when the Lord is at His most unapproachable, to plead for the people. And he comes armed with a question, three arguments, and a request. Let's look at these closely, in verses 11-13, in order.

Now the question doesn't look like it makes much sense. "Why are You going to destroy Israel?" That's the question. "O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" Now, you may be asking yourself, "Why is he asking that question? It's perfectly obvious why God's anger is burning against Israel. Why

are you asking that? Aren't you just going to make Him mad, Moses?" By the way, especially the first part of it, "Why does Your anger burn against Your people?" is actually a key to understanding the language of this passage with regard to God's words about burning and destroying, because very frequently in the Old Testament, when emotions like burning anger are attributed to God, it is in fact a vivid way of talking about God's announced actions. So, when Moses says, "Why is Your anger burning?" he's not asking God about His emotional state. He's not even asking God, "God, why are You morally indignant about idolatry?" That's not what Moses is asking. Moses is saying, "God, why are You going to destroy the people that You brought out and saved?"

You see, the question is not about God's emotional state, and it's not a question about the rightness or moral rectitude of what God is doing in promising to bring judgment. He's asking the question, and it's answered in the second part of the question, "Why are You going to destroy Your People?" By the time he gets to the second part of the question, he's into his first argument.

So Moses' question sets up his first argument. You see the first argument in the second half of the sentence, "Why are You going to destroy the people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" There's his first argument: God's election and redemption. God chose this people. God redeemed this people. Moses is arguing God's election and redemption back against God. He's saying, "Lord, You chose to have a relationship with Israel. Israel did not choose You. You chose to bring Israel out of Egypt. Israel did not bring Israel out of Egypt. I did not bring Israel out of Egypt. You chose to. Why do You want to destroy them now?" The argument, you see, is an appeal to God's sovereign choice. He has made a choice for Israel to be His. He has made a choice to save Israel, and Moses is appealing that argument that God had so well taught to Moses, right back to God.

Then, look again at verse 12. Here's his second argument. "Why should the Egyptians speak?" There is an appeal to God's glory, an appeal to God's name, an appeal to God's reputation. Moses is concerned for the glory and the name and reputation of God. He's saying, "Lord, if You destroy them now, the Egyptians will say, 'Look, that god couldn't save them. They perished in the wilderness.' Or, 'Look, that god is capricious. He saved them, and then he killed them.' Or, 'Look, that god is not as great as he said he was.' Or, 'Look, that god does not keep his promises.'" The point Moses is making is that "the Egyptians, the nations, the pagans, will reproach You, O God, and I want Your name to be glorified and honored among the nations."

Then he lifts up his petition, his request, and here it is in verse 12. "Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people." Notice again the parallel between burning anger, the emotional ascription, and from destroying Your people. Basically, interpreting what it means for God's anger to burn. For God's anger to burn, means for Him to be set upon taking the

action of judgment. And there is the request: "Don't do it. Lord, You have every right to do it. Every judge in the universe would say, 'Yes, He has every right to do what He did.' Lord, You're right. Your people deserve judgment. Don't do it." That's the request.

And then one last argument. In verse 13, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel." That's hitting home. Do you remember the last time that phrase factored into God's redemptive purposes in the book of Exodus? It's in Exodus 2:28, "The people of God were burdened in Egypt under the whips and harshness of their oppressors, and their cries went up to heaven," and what does Moses tell us happened? "God heard their cries and He remembered the promise He had made to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob," and now, here's Moses saying, "Lord God, remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That's what brought this people out of Egypt in the first place. Remember it again, for them."

What's he doing? He's pleading the covenant. He's pleading the promise. Remember Abraham, the servant that You swore to by Yourself.

Now, there's several things you need to note about this prayer. First of all, note how Moses reflects and turns back on God the very language that God has used. Remember, the people had said, 'Where's this guy who brought us out of Egypt?' And God, in judgment against that attitude, had said to Moses, "Moses, you go down to that people that you brought out." Not, "My people that I brought out," but you go to "that people that you brought out." And what does Moses come back to God and say? "Lord God, remember Your people, whom You brought out of Egypt." He puts it right back to the Lord. He takes God's own language and he hands it back. And when God says, 'I'm going to allow My anger to burn and destroy,' look at what Moses says, "Turn Your burning anger from them. Do not destroy." He takes God's words and he hands them right back.

Secondly, notice that this prayer appeals to the consistency of God's own nature, and it is grounded in the reliability of God's self-revelation in His revealed will. Don't get the idea that God is capricious here, that He's in a huff, and Moses is having to argue with an unstable, unreliable God. No. All of Moses' prayer depends upon God being reliable, being consistent with the way that he acts. By the way, if you will look at the language of *repent*, or *change His mind*, in the Old Testament, you will find an absolutely frightening consistency with God in that regard. So many people want to make this, "Well, God will do this," and then they'll flip flop and, "He will do that." No.

Every time this language is used in the Old Testament, do you know how it's used? It's either used to indicate God relenting from His punishment who have repented, or relenting from His blessing on people who are presumptuous in the covenant. It's used that way every single time it's employed. In other words, God is constant as a northern star. You can bank on how He is going to respond when people are either presumptuous or repentant. When they are repentant,

He's looking for an excuse to bless them. When they are presumptuous, watch out. And that's exactly what's happening here.

Thirdly, notice that this prayer serves to highlight the vital role of the mediator standing in the gap, but also as a provision of God for His people. Don't get the picture that Moses is talking God into being merciful. Moses is there because God is merciful. God provided Moses. God taught Moses everything he knows. When Moses wasn't compassionate, God was. Moses learned his compassion from God, and the things that he's giving back to God, he's learned from God.

Fourthly, notice how this prayer draws attention to the ground of Israel's hope. All of those grounds are in God and in His covenant, and in His actions, and none of those grounds are in Israel or based on their worthiness or faithfulness or goodness. It's God's election, God's honor, God's glory, God's covenant, God's promise that Moses lifts up to God. That's the stuff of our hope. Our hope, isn't it beautiful, our hope itself is theocentric. It's not based on something in me. Our hope itself is theocentric and grace derived.

That's why we sing hymns like, "A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing, nor fear with Thy righteousness on, my person and offering to bring. The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete. His promise is yea and amen, and never was forfeited yet. Things future nor things that are now, nor all things below or above, can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love." That's why we sing, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come." That's why we sing, "Under the shadow of Thy throne, Thy saints have dwelt secure, sufficient is Thine arm alone, and our defense is sure." That's why we can sing, "Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee. Thou changest not Thy compassions, they fail not, as Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be." That's why we sing, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust not the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. His oath, His covenant, His blood, support my in the whelming flood, when all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay." Because our hope is outside of us. And that's what Moses' prayer is saying.

Did you notice that Moses does not say, "Lord, You're being a little hard on Israel. I have found four really good points. They've really given a lot to the Salvation Army this year. Twice they've helped little old ladies across the street." There's no argumentation to mitigate the deserving of judgment of the people of God. It's all God. "Lord, remember what You promised. Lord, remember who You chose. Lord, remember Your glory."

Moses is an excellent defense attorney. Those folks, they'd be in San Quentin immediately. And it's as if Moses is before the judge saying, "Let's forget about them for a minute, judge, let's talk about you. You're the nicest judge I've ever

met.” It has nothing to do with anything in them. It has everything to do with the mercy of God. Moses pleads the mercy of God on the basis of God's character and promises, and it's vital for us as believers to grasp those grounds of mercy, and to know and to appreciate the Mediator who intercedes for us based on what He had done and what God has promised, and not on anything in us at all. It's Christ alone, not Christ plus a little bit of something we add. It's Christ alone. It's God alone. It's grace alone. That alone is absolutely vital. If the alone is not there, you'll never have assurance. If the alone is not there, you'll never understand grace. If the *alone* is not there, it may well be that you are substituting something that you think you bring to the almighty God, instead of His great mercy, as the ground of your salvation. That's the first point.

## II. Does God change His mind?

I would like to have spent an hour and a half on “Does God Change His Mind?” but here's the five-minute version. Look at verse 14: the Lord changed His mind about the harm that He said He would do to His people. “Well, doesn't that settle it? I mean, it says it right there, ‘The Lord changed His mind, so I guess God does change His mind.’ Does God repent? Does He regret? Does He change His mind? Does He change His plan? Help me here!”

When Moses tells us this in verse 14, he is telling us that the gracious God of Israel has withheld a deserved destruction in response to the prayers of the mediator. The point is not that God's plan has changed. The point is not that God's mind has changed. But, that the previously announced course of action is not going to be put into effect. The point is not that somehow Moses has raised a few good points that God had not thought about before. The point is not that Moses was just so effective in his argument that God had to give up. The point is that when we see the phrase, *changed His mind*, or *repent*, and by the way, you will see this in every place that it's used in the Old Testament, 2 Samuel 24:16, 1 Chronicles 21:15, Psalm 106:45, Jeremiah 18:3-18, Jeremiah 26:13, Jonah 3, Jonah 4, Amos 7, Number 23, 1 Samuel 15, Malachi 3, Romans 11, Hebrews 6, James 1, just run a quick word search, pick up a concordance and look for the passages that use *repent*, different translations handle the differently, but the translators generally try to use the same phraseology so you can track them through in your English Bible, and here's what you'll find: *change His mind*, or *repent*, when it's applied to God, is a graphic translation, it's meant to grab hold of you.

It contains, however, an easily misunderstood figure of speech, wherein we apply human emotions and human patterns of behavior to God for the purpose of making a point.

That point, however, effectively stresses the following things: One, that prayer and repentance matter. Our prayer, and repentance matter. They are the very



instrument that God uses to call His grace down. Secondly, they effectively stress that God hates sin. He loves repentance, He loves faith, He hates presumption, and He is constant as the northern star in that regard. He always loves repentance. He always hates presumption. He always loves faith, He always hates unbelief.

Thirdly, it stresses that God is determined to curse unbelief and unrepentance, and to bless belief and repentance.

And fourthly, that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. And so, every time you find these repent passages, they focus on precisely the truth, not that God has changed His mind or changed His plan, or changed His promise, or changed His commitment, or changed His word, or changed His hope, but that He is consistent. So Malachi can say, "For I the Lord, do not change, therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed." It is precisely because God does not repent, that Israel is still around after Exodus 32. He's made a pledge. He's made a commitment, He's going to see it through, and the seeing through of it is not going to be based upon Israel, but it's going to be based upon Him.

So the point is not that God's mind changed here. John Currid argues that the verb may be better translated or rendered, the Lord had compassion. But however you render it, that's not the point. However you render it, the point is God is not capricious here. In fact He is doing exactly what He said in Jeremiah 18:6-10. Study it sometime and this is what He says: "Whenever I promise something and you are presumptuous, I will judge you. And whenever you sin and I threaten judgment and then you repent, I will receive you." What's He saying? He's saying I'm a God who is looking for an excuse to have compassion on you. And when you repent, you can bet your bottom dollar that I am going to respond in mercy, but when you are presumptuous and turn your back on Me and the promises that I make, you can bet that judgment is coming right behind.

His point then, is not that we can somehow change the secret will and plan of God, but that He is consistent in the way that He deals with us. Why then would God say, "Let me alone that I may destroy them" unless He was just about to do it. Because it was vital for them to know their need of a mediator. You remember that the people of God decided that they didn't need Moses. Anybody here think that anybody in Israel thought that they didn't need Moses when this was all over? Anybody here? There's no way you get through this incident and don't realize that you need a mediator. God gives you a mediator, you jolly well need that mediator.

Secondly, it was vital for God to do this so that His people would realize that His threatened destruction was precisely what they deserved. You know, if this event had not happened it would have been very easy for Israel to come through the Exodus experience and begin to think, "You know, we're pretty good. No wonder

God chose us.” But my friends, after this there could be no delusion on the part of anyone that the reason that they were still with God was because they were pretty good.

Thirdly, this event was vital in order for the people of God to understand why God did not bring the threatened destruction. And they learned that on the basis of Moses’ intercession. Moses said nothing about them, but everything about God, everything about His grace, everything about His covenant. Nobody could have come out from that and said, “Well you know, the reason that God spared us is because we were sort of faithful; we were pretty good; we were going to church; we were trying hard.” Fill in the blank. Nothing about you; all about God, all about the mediator, all about the covenant, all about mercy.

God does not change His mind, but He does choose to reveal some things and not others for good and wise reasons. *We* do not change God's mind, but He does use our prayer to bring about His will even as He used Moses’ prayer. God does not change but He is constant as the northern star in punishing unbelief and idolatry and forgiving the repentant and keeping His covenant even when we fail. God tells His people clearly what the purpose of His uniform response will be to their repentance for sin and their presumption on the promises, and He details that for you in Jeremiah 18. I commend it to you. All of those things God is teaching here. God is teaching the people of God to focus their hope on Him and on His promises, as the only ground of that hope, as the only occasion for mercy. And that's a lesson we still need to learn. Let's pray.

*Lord God, we love You, and we thank You, and we pray that You would grant us the grace to trust in Christ alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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