

Serving the Lord who Saves the Unrighteous

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Date: 06 November 2016

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[0 : 0 0] All of that excitement and so on, and you come finally to the room that you're going to stay in with your newly married husband-wife. And as you get to the room and open the door and go in, you realize that you've left behind your marriage certificate.

So you head off and say, I'll be back in a minute, and you go and pick up the marriage certificate. The ink is still not quite dry, and you take it back to the room, looking forward to the night ahead, newly marrieds, and you open the door, and there is the person you've just married in bed with someone else.

That's hard to imagine that. But in a way, that's an equivalent of what's going on at this sin of the golden calf at Mount Sinai. God is just making this sort of marriage arrangement with ancient Israel.

The two tablets of stone on which are the Ten Commandments is the equivalent of the marriage certificate. And right at the point where God is establishing this relationship, they turn to another God and sort of jump into bed with another God.

The golden calf, in effect. So in chapter 9, Moses reminds them that when he was sent by God down the mountain, and he saw that the golden calf and he smashed those two stone tablets, the tearing up of the marriage certificate equivalent.

[1 : 1 9] It's all over, basically. The relationship is already broken, is in effect what that sin was about. And that's what Moses reminds them of through the verses of chapter 9.

God, in a way, disowns the people. It's God and Israel who've been in this, beginning this relationship, and God disowns them entirely. He says to Moses in verse 12, At the end of the, or in verse 11, At the end of 40 days and 40 nights, the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant.

And then he said to me, Get up, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought out from Egypt have acted corruptly. They've been quick to turn from the way that I commanded them.

God's disowning them. Moses, they're your people that you brought down. Nothing to do with me. And so Moses goes down the mountain. What he reminds them of in chapter 9 is an abbreviated version of what we read in a fuller length in Exodus 32 to 34.

Three chapters devoted in Exodus to this sin. And Moses is merely reminding them. Many of the people he's speaking to were children at the time. Others were born after the event. The adults of that day are dead in the wilderness by now.

[2 : 3 4] But they would all know this story. It's not unfamiliar to them. So Moses comes down. He sees the sin. He smashes the stone tablets. But then what does he do?

He prays. So we read, for example, in chapter 9 still, in verse 18. Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before for 40 days and 40 nights.

I neither ate bread nor drank water because of all the sin that you've committed, provoking the Lord by doing what was evil in his sight. For I was afraid that the anger that the Lord bore against you was so fierce that he'd destroy you.

But the Lord listened to me at that time also. So Moses prayed. And God listened to him. He listened also to Moses' prayer about Aaron. That's in verse 20. And Moses then, in verse 21 and 2, destroys that sinful thing, he calls it.

As though he can barely call it a golden calf. That sinful thing. Totally destroyed. Now that's not the only sin. Moses reminds them in verses 22 to 24. At Taborah also you sinned.

[3 : 42] At Massah, at Kibroth Hattava, and so on. Time and again. They've sinned against God. They are stubborn. They are stiff-necked. What he said in verse 6 is exactly true.

What did Moses pray? It's striking that what he prayed is now given at the end of the chapter 9. It fits in place in verse 18 and 19.

That's when he prayed. But we're not told then what he prayed. It just said, I prayed. God listened to me. I prayed for Aaron. God listened to me. And so on. But as if to now highlight what he prayed, it comes in verses 25 to 29 at the end of the chapter.

And there's three key points in this prayer. As with any prayer in the Bible, when we're told what somebody prayed, we are to learn from the content of the prayer. So we know that we should pray, but what do we pray?

And here's a good example. Now, we're not in a situation where we're the leader of a people who are at Mount Sinai sinning. But we are often praying for brothers and sisters in Christ.

[4 : 52] We're often praying for the church that is struggling in the world, struggling often because of our own sins and failings. What do we pray? Why do we pray what we pray? Well, Moses' prayer here gives us, I think, some good answers to that sort of question.

In verse 26, I prayed to the Lord and said, firstly, Lord God, literally sovereign Lord, do not destroy the people who are your very own possession, whom you redeemed in your greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Now, if you remember back what I just said in verse 12, you realize how brave Moses' prayer is. In verse 12, God said to Moses, go down, your people whom you brought out.

And Moses now prays and says, God, your people whom you brought out. Whose people are they? Well, literally, they're God's. It's God who's acted already to bring them out of Egypt, to rescue them from slavery, to bring them to the promised land.

They're God's people. And Moses is reminding God of that. Not that God's sort of forgotten in his head. But rather, Moses is, in a sense, well, we could say even correcting God, but it's not because God is wrong.

[6 : 06] God's making a point of disownership. And Moses is saying, God, you can't disown them. They're your people. You've acted already to save them. Hang on to them, God.

Complete what you've begun, we could say. Notice also that Moses gives no excuse. He doesn't say, God, they've had a bad time. If you'd been 38 years in the wilderness, or even a few weeks in the wilderness, actually, when the Sinai sin was committed, you'd be a bit suffering.

He doesn't give any excuse. So often when we sin, we give excuses. We blame the government and our parents and our children and the neighbors next door and, you know, not sleeping very well last night. That's sort of excuse all the time.

But there's no excuse here. No blame game like the man and the woman in the garden either. So the first thing, God, they're your people. And then secondly, in verse 27, remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Why remember them? What's the significance of them in this context? Well, it was to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that God made the promises that guide the story of the whole Bible, actually, from Genesis 12.

[7 : 17] That he would make a great nation, many descendants, the land, blessing them, and through them blessing the world. If God destroyed Israel, even if he started again with Moses, in effect, the promises to Abraham would be broken by God.

Moses is saying to God, God, be faithful to what you promise. Now, many of us would take it for granted that God is a faithful God. Moses is praying, God, be faithful.

Now, you might think, well, how ridiculous. If God is faithful, why do we pray, God, be faithful? But actually, a lot of our prayer is about getting us understanding the promises of God and holding God to account.

And so that's what Moses is doing in the prayer. Those promises of Genesis 12 to Abraham were repeated a number of times to Abraham, then explicitly to Isaac in Genesis 26 and to Jacob in Genesis 28.

Never again are those promises given to an individual. Which is why it says, remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It doesn't say, remember Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph or Judah.

[8 : 23] It stops with Jacob because then all his descendants are part of those promises. So this nation of Israel is God keeping those promises. Don't destroy them.

They're your people. That's part of the tension of the Old Testament and Bible story. God makes promises. But the promises, in a way, depend on the response of God's people.

And we know that God's people are wayward. How is a faithful God going to keep his promises with such a rebellious people? They deserve to be punished.

That's what God said he's going to do. But now Moses prays for them. And that tension of God's faithfulness and yet God's holiness runs through Scripture. Culminating and climaxing on a cross where God both exercises his judgment and justice and yet keeps his promises through the power of the cross.

Which we'll see a little bit more of in a minute. And then thirdly in Moses' prayer in verse 28 he says, Otherwise, that is if you destroy Israel, the land from which you've brought us might say, Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them.

[9 : 40] And because he hated them, that he's destroyed them in the wilderness. Well both of those things are untrue. God is not unable to bring them into the land. And God does not hate them.

But if God destroyed Israel, the Egyptians from where they'd come would say, Their God, he's not powerful. He couldn't do it. And their God hated them. That's why he destroyed them.

Both of which are untrue. Notice how Moses' prayer is driven in part by recognizing it's not just about Israel. It's about the world.

God wants the world. That was his promise to Abraham. That through you all the nations of the world would be blessed. And God, Moses recognizes here that Israel is to be the vehicle by which God brings blessing to the world.

If you destroy Israel, God, the rest of the world is going to think badly of you. They'll misunderstand you. That's a puzzle in a way. But it's part of how we should be praying for the fallen church.

[10 : 44] For our fallen brothers and sisters. Often we want the church to grow because we like a big church. We like the idea of success or something. But Moses isn't driven by that here. God, we pray, forgive your church.

Forgive your people. Restore them. Grow them. Help them. Not just for their sake. But actually for the world's sake. Because we know in the West that the church that is in such decline is so often mocked and ridiculed.

And God is mocked and ridiculed because of the failings of the church. We see it in the dreadful sins of child abuse over the decades in this country and beyond. For example. So God, in a way, restore your church for the sake of the world.

That's what Moses is praying in his context hundreds of years ago. And God hears the prayer. God withdraws his threat of destruction.

And starting again with Moses. We know that God hears the prayer. In part because verse 19 says that. The Lord listened to me at that time also.

[11 : 52] But because chapter 10 immediately goes on to say, Take two more tablets of stone. The exact same words. A new marriage certificate. An exact replica of what was there before. The relationship's restored.

And Aaron is kept as the high priest, though later to die. And the relationship continues beyond this terrible sin of the golden calf. But in the light of all of that.

In the light of a God who speaks. A God who gives his law. A God who's rescued. A God who's made promises. And in the light of a people who are so fickle and faithless. What does the Lord your God require of you?

Those five things. Fear him. Not to be scared. Not to run away from God. But a fear in the sense of a holy awe. We see it with, say, Isaiah in a temple.

As he falls down in the sight of the vision of God in the temple. That we don't take God too casually. Too lightly. Fear God. And secondly, to walk in his ways.

[12 : 55] As chapter 10 verse 12 says. To walk in his ways. It's not literally about going for a walk. A stroll. In Malaysia we'd say jalan jalan. But rather it's the habitual practice of the right direction with God.

It doesn't mean perfection. But it means not just an occasional obedience. But an habitual walking in God's ways. That it's the practice. The general practice.

And then thirdly in the five. And central in the five. Probably deliberately to highlight its centrality and significance. Love God. We already saw earlier in Deuteronomy chapter 6.

The famous verse. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. And here it's in the middle. Love God. In the Old Testament there were. Sorry.

In the ancient world. There were commands to love other gods. But almost never do you get the idea that a God might love his people. But that's embedded in the Old Testament. Love is the only reciprocated sort of idea.

[14 : 00] God loves. You are to love God. So these other commands. Fear God. But God doesn't fear his people. Serve God. God doesn't serve them. Walk in God's ways. God doesn't walk in our ways. But love goes both ways.

God loves. And we love God. And then fourthly in this list. To serve. To worship we could say. But not in the sense. Or limited sense.

Of the gathering for a festival. Or a Sabbath day. Or Sunday worship in our context. It's general. It's over the whole of life. The whole of life is to serve and worship God.

A bit like what Paul says for example in Romans 12. In that famous verse about offering ourselves as a living sacrifice. For this is your right worship. The whole of our life is to serve or to worship God.

And then lastly. To keep his commandments. There's overlap in all of these terms. To keep commandments. To obey them. But not just merely in a rigid mechanical external way.

[15 : 01] We know so much of the Old Testament about the joy of loving God. And therefore the joy of keeping his commandments. These five things are not separate things. We can't go around asking. Now how many of the five are you doing?

Oh I've got one. Oh I've got two. But I've still got three to go. It doesn't work like that. The rhetoric of the five. They're intertwined. It's a package really. They overlap in their meaning.

They're showing us that obedience is going to flow out of the heart. A heart that loves and a heart that fears. Is the person who's walking in God's ways. And keeping his commandments. Not begrudgingly or reluctantly.

But lovingly. That is there's an integrity between the heart and the action. And the five of these things all together. Is telling us that. That's what God wants.

It's the simple executive summary. Even someone like me could. Oh no I can't do it. Our hearts are stubborn. We're sinful people. It sounds so simple.

[15 : 59] But could Israel do it? A little bit later in this last paragraph of chapter 10. We get a couple more commands. From verse 17.

We read that you are a great God. Awesome. Not partial. Taking no bribe. You execute justice for the orphan. The widow. God loves the stranger. Providing them with food and clothing.

You shall also love the stranger. For you are strangers in the land of Egypt. But implied there is that not just God. It's not just God who takes no bribe.

Shows no partiality. The widow. The orphan. It's only the stranger that's mentioned in verse 19. Sorry. Verse 20. Yes. Verse 19. But the implication is all of those things about God.

Are to be seen in God's people. In chapter 16. When they appoint judges in their towns. The judges are to do. And it's word for word. What's here. Take no bribe. Show no partiality.

[16 : 58] Etc. But so it ought to be for all of God's people. That's the implication here. It's reminding us that. Whilst the first couple of those five verbs. In verses 12 and 13.

Are in a sense God would in their direction. The practice of that will have social. Community consequences. And in particular. Are highlighting here the needy.

The needy. Or the vulnerable. In ancient Israel. Would be the people who did not own land. Widows would not own land. Orphans would not own land.

Nor would the Levites. Though they're not mentioned here. In this verse. And the other category would be. The stranger. There's no easy English word. To translate this word stranger.

Your translation may have alien. Well we think of aliens. As coming from Mars. That's not what was meant here. An older English translation. Would have the word sojourner. We don't use that word really.

[17 : 55] The closest I think we get. Is something like an immigrant. Not necessarily a refugee. It could be. But it's really somebody. Who wants to belong to Israel.

But from another country. Ruth is a good example. In the book of Ruth. The Moabite. But she pledges herself. To become in effect an Israelite. Rahab the prostitute. At the beginning of the book of Joshua.

Is similar. She's a Canaanite. But she wants in effect. To be an Israelite. With Israel's God. And what's being stressed here. I think. Is again this reminder.

That the whole purpose. Of ancient Israel. Is for the sake of every nation. That the aliens are welcome. The strangers are welcome. For the sake. In effect of the gospel.

That God's chosen Israel. For the sake of the blessing. Of all the nations. We are the children of Abraham now. And so it applies to us.

[18 : 50] In a way. That our care of the vulnerable. The weak. The marginalized. The widows. The orphans. The alien. Strangers. Or refugees. That's part of. Living out the gospel.

For the sake of the gospel. For the nations. To be drawn in. One of the extraordinary things. In our world today. Is the. Huge numbers. Of refugees.

Through terror. And persecution. And yet. How open the door. For the gospel is. In so many places. In Germany. For example.

Motivated by Angela Merkel's. Christian faith. I think. The generosity. Of welcoming refugees. Has seen. Thousands. Of Middle Eastern. Muslims. Give up Islam. For Jesus.

In England. Where a friend of mine. Is a vicar. On the other side. Of his town. There is a huge influx. Again. Of Middle Eastern. Muslims. And that. Church.

[19 : 44] Has baptized. Dozens. And dozens. Of people. Out of Islam. Into the light. Of Christ. In a different context. We've seen that. At Holy Trinity. In 99.

We started. Chinese ministry. They're not refugees. Particularly. From China. But people. Who've come. And some of you. Are in that category. Who've come. From China. And as visitors.

Immigrants. Aliens. Strangers. To our land. Have become Christian. Through the openness. Of this church. To welcome people. From other places.

And it's not just China. But that's our. The big one here. I suppose. These verses. I think. Are a reminder. To us. That if we truly. Are fearing. And loving God. And keeping his.

Commandments. Walking in his ways. Serving him. Then we will be loving. The vulnerable. The poor. The marginalized. Both within our local. Neighborhood. But beyond as well. For the sake of the gospel.

[20 : 39] For seeing people. Become strangers. And aliens. Embracing the gospel. Of Jesus Christ. But again. The trouble is. This sounds so simple. But could Israel do it?

They're stiff-necked. They're stubborn. That was the sentence given. In chapter 9. Verse 6. And even though. They were forgiven. Through Moses intercession. At the end of chapter 9. Nothing's changed.

Within them. And that's why. At the middle of this paragraph. In chapter 10. At the heart of it. Chapter 10. 12 to 22. What should God require?

In the middle of this paragraph. Comes this odd command. Circumcise then. The foreskin of your heart. And be stiff-necked. No longer. Now if you have a stiff neck.

You might go and get a massage. But the Old Testament. Remedy. Is heart surgery. Might seem a bit peculiar. If you're a doctor. In particular. I guess. That if you've got a sore neck.

[21 : 38] Have a heart surgery. But here. Because you're stiff-necked Israel. Circumcise the foreskin of your heart. Now if I was to say to you today. Now's the time.

To circumcise the foreskin of your heart. What are you going to do? Run out to the kitchen. And find a sharp knife. Ask the doctors here. To do something. Sweet hang. Stand up. I don't know.

It's a metaphor. It's an image. What's it about? Why this peculiar command? Well we know. That back in Genesis. Abraham was commanded. That he and all the men.

Of the household. Should be circumcised. Physically. In the flesh. The reason. Is that it follows. The sin with Hagar. Where Abraham had sexual relations. To produce a child. Not trusting God's promise.

That Sarah would be the wife. And the one to produce the child. And so. Circumcision then. Was a sign. A sign of the covenant. A sign of the relationship. Not in itself.

- [22 : 34] The remedy. The physical remedy. But pointing to the fact. That Abraham lacked faith. And trust in God. And therefore acted wrongly. The real circumcision. That's needed.
- As this command says. Is of the heart. But how do you do it? It's not a physical thing. Later in Deuteronomy. In the climax. Of the whole sermon.
- Of the book. Chapter 30. Is the last part. Of Moses preaching. In this book. Moses says. God. Will circumcise. Your hearts.
- And the hearts. Of your children. Chapter 30. Verse 6. But when does God do it? He doesn't do it immediately. It's not there. In Deuteronomy. In the last chapters. You read the book of Joshua.
- It doesn't seem to have been done. And judges. Samuel. Into the kings. David. Solomon. We don't see Israel's hearts. Circumcised. We don't see them loving. And obeying God. As they ought to do. Glimpses of goodness.
- [23 : 28] Here and there. But basically. Downward spirals. Doesn't happen after the exile. When they return. From exile. Either. If you read the last prophets. Of the Old Testament.
- But when we get into the New Testament. We find there. Remarkably. Astonishingly. What God says in Deuteronomy. I will circumcise the hearts. Comes true.
- To the Romans. Paul says at the end of chapter 2. The real circumcision is not by the spirit. But by. Sorry. Not by. Of the flesh. But by the spirit. And in Colossians chapter 2.
- He expounds it a little bit more clearly. That if you've embraced the Lord Jesus Christ. As your savior. In his death and burial and resurrection. Then your heart. Has been circumcised.
- By God. It doesn't mean you're perfect. But your heart is changed. What it's telling us is this. That the fulfillment of this command. In chapter 10 verse 16.
- [24 : 25] Is that God does what he requires. Requires of us. Because we cannot. God. And he's telling us. Ultimately in the Bible. That the way our hearts are changed.
- And circumcised. Certainly not something we can do. Not something we can do for each other. But he's done in the cross. You see the cross is so powerful.
- That it not only forgives us our wrongdoing. We see that in chapter 9. With Moses prayer and intercession. And God's forgiveness. But the cross does more. It changes our hearts.
- We're not instantly perfect. Our hearts are not instantly perfected. But on the day of the Lord's return. We will love God.
- We will obey him. With joy. With hearts that are right and pure. And between now and then. If we're believers in Jesus. We're being changed. We're being changed. We're being changed.
- [25 : 23] We're being changed. We're being changed.