

Forgiveness in the Old Testament



MEMORY VERSE: “The Lord then passed in front of him [Moses] and called out, ‘I, the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion [mercy]¹ and pity,² who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep my promise for thousands of generations³ and forgive evil and sin’” (Exodus 34:6, 7, TEV).

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IN JULY OF A.D. 144, Marion, a church leader, was accused of being a heretic (false teacher) for teaching that the God of the Old Testament was evil.

Even today, some people think that the God of the Old Testament is not the same God of the New Testament as shown by Jesus. But this week’s memory verse from the Old Testament teaches us that the God of the Old Testament is just as loving and forgiving as the God of the New Testament.

This week, we will study the deep riches of God’s forgiving nature in some of the books of the Old Testament. In these books, we will see that the love of Jesus was shown many hundreds of years before He came to earth.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: Why do we need God’s forgiveness? What does it mean to sin against God? What are the different Hebrew words in the Old Testament for “forgiveness”? What can these words teach us about how God forgives? What does the story of Hosea teach us about God’s willingness to forgive? Is forgiveness any different in the Old Testament than in the New Testament?

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath April 12.

¹mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

²pity—sympathy; being sad for someone who is suffering.

³generations—future children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, et cetera.

SUN THE FORGIVING GOD.

“But God was merciful⁴ to his people. He forgave their sin and did not destroy them. Many times he held back his anger and restrained [controlled] his fury [anger]” (Psalm 78:38, TEV).

The Bible is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness, because the Bible is a book about how God works with people who are sinners. Sin separates us from God, who is the Giver of life. We needed forgiveness, and God has met that need. If He had not, we would have no hope.

What do the following verses have in common? Genesis 39:9; Psalm 51:4; Daniel 9:8; Zephaniah 1:17; Jeremiah 51:5. How do they help us understand why we need God’s forgiveness?

When a person breaks a criminal law, it is judged as an act against the government. Then that person is judged as having acted against the government which made the law.

In the same way, sin is always a sin against God. He is the One who established His law as the foundation (basis) of His government. Now, if all humans sin and all sin is against God, then all have sinned against Him. So it is no surprise that we need His forgiveness.

⁴merciful—full of mercy.

Fortunately, God is merciful and loving. He is willing to forgive again and again and again, because we sin again and again and again. If He did not forgive us, what hope would we have?

The Old Testament has many examples of God’s forgiveness, because it is filled with examples of human sin. If it were not for the promise of forgiveness, sin would lead to death. The Old Testament is filled with hope, because it is filled with forgiveness.

It is easy to understand the idea of sinning against other people. We betray them, cheat them, or steal from them, and we can see the damage our sin causes. But what does it mean to sin against God? Does sin “hurt” God? If so, in what way?

MON TO BEAR (CARRY; ACCEPT), TO CLEANSE, TO FORGIVE.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness. The word *forgive* often comes from three main words. These three words are rich in meaning. Each word shows a different part of forgiveness. These words form a nice picture that helps us understand what forgiveness means.

Read Exodus 32:32; Psalm 25:18; Psalm 32:1. The Hebrew word in

these verses translated “forgive” comes from a word whose basic meaning is “to bear,” “to carry.” Below, write out how “to bear,” or “to carry” helps you understand how God forgives.

Read Deuteronomy 21:8 and Jeremiah 18:23. The word in these verses translated “forgive” comes from the word that means “to atone (to forgive, to cleanse)” (Leviticus 1:4; Leviticus 4:20, 35). Atonement is the foundation (basis) of forgiveness. Atonement also carries the meaning of “to cleanse,” “to wipe off,” and “to cover.” Write down how you understand the idea of forgiveness from knowing the meaning of “atonement.”

In Leviticus 4:26; Leviticus 5:10; 1 Kings 8:30; Psalm 86:5; and Jeremiah 31:34, the Hebrew verb for forgive means “to forgive,” or “to pardon.”

Take what you have learned from these different words and the verses they are used in. Then write out below how all together they help you understand the process of forgiveness in the Old Testament. Is the basis of forgiveness any different in the New Testament? Explain your answer.



“Happy are those [people] whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned” (Psalm 32:1, 2, TEV).

TUE GOD REPENTS⁵ (Exodus 32:1-14).

Suppose someone has never seen the Bible nor heard anything about the kind of God in the Bible. Then that person finds a piece of the Bible with Exodus 32:1-14 on it. Write down what this person might think about God based on Exodus 32:1-14. Why could these verses alone give the wrong impression about God’s character?

Moses begged God not to destroy the Hebrews because they worshiped the golden calf. But most people believe that Moses did not change God’s mind about destroying them. After all, God could have been right to destroy

⁵repents—when God repents, it means that He forgives rather than punishes.

them. Look at what He had done for them. He freed them from Egypt after being slaves for hundreds of years (Exodus 12:41). Look at how fast the people fell into backsliding⁶ (Exodus 32:8). They did exactly what God told them not to do (Exodus 20:3-6). Still, God was willing to forgive them. So He is not a harsh (strict) God who changes His mind only because some sinful human being asks Him to. This story is an example of God's willingness to forgive His people, even when they do not deserve it.



We believe that the God presented in Exodus 32:1-14 is Jesus of Nazareth. Read John 8:58; John 14:9; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-10. What examples can you find from the life of Jesus that show this same willingness to forgive people who did not deserve to be forgiven?

Many people are confused by the words in Exodus 32:14: The Lord “repented” of His plan to wipe out the Israelites. How does an all-powerful God, who knows the beginning from the end, “repent” from something? That God “repents” does not mean He changes His mind. Instead, He forgives out of His mercy, rather than punishing sinners as they deserve. This forgiveness is made available to all humans because of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Imagine you meet a person who knows nothing else about God other than what he or she found in Exodus 32:1-14. What other verses and stories could you share that would give this person a better picture about God’s character? What lesson can we learn about the danger of preparing a study about God from only one verse or story?

WED LOVING UNLOVABLE PEOPLE —PART 1.

“When the Lord first spoke to Israel through Hosea, he said to Hosea, ‘Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful,⁷ and your children will be like⁸ her. In the same way my people have left me and become unfaithful’ ” (Hosea 1:2, TEV).

The story of Hosea and his unfaithful wife clearly shows us what God

⁶backsliding—no longer doing what God wants you to do.

⁷unfaithful—not faithful.

⁸like—the same as.

wants us to learn about forgiveness and the results it brings.

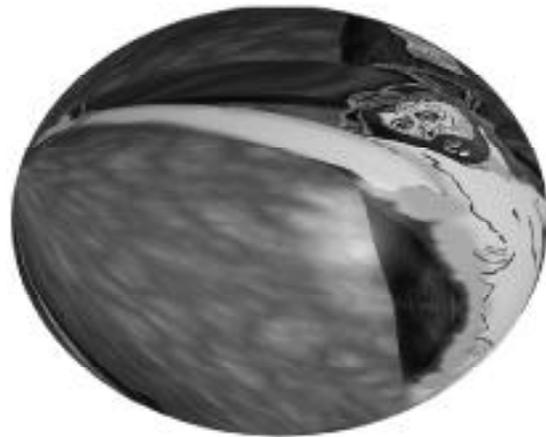
Why should God ask someone to marry an unfaithful woman? What point was He making? Hosea 1.

How many people would marry someone, knowing ahead of time, that this person was going to commit adultery? But this is what Hosea did. Hosea's story gives a strong picture of both sin and forgiveness.

A husband-and-wife relationship is a symbol of the closeness between God and His people. Adultery is one of the worst things that can break up a marriage. In the same way, sin can damage our relationship with God and with each other. Sin pollutes every part of our life and leads to guilt and unhappiness⁹ within ourselves and with other people. Because of sin, a person cannot trust or be trusted, love or be loved. Sin is not just the result of what we do. Sin shows what we are. The book of Hosea shows that adultery is a good example of sin and how sin influences our relationships with each other and with God.

"O poor man, what a crippled monster sin has made you! God has made you a 'little lower than the angels'. Sin has made you little better than the devils."—Adapted from Joseph Alleine, quoted in Michael Brown, *Go and Sin No More* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1999), p. 20.

If we see how much sin damages us, we can understand what God paid to forgive us our sin. Look at the Cross. Jesus was equal with God. But He accepted upon Himself the penalty for our sins. This is the only way our sins could be forgiven. What does that tell us about just how evil sin must be?



Sin is so evil, Jesus had to die.

THU LOVING UNLOVABLE¹⁰ PEOPLE—PART 2 (HOSEA 3).

"The Lord said to me [Hosea], 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another [man] and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred [holy] raisin cakes' "(Hosea 3:1, NIV).

Gomer, Hosea's wife, openly loves another man. But God tells Hosea to take her back.

⁹unhappiness—not happy.

¹⁰unlovable—People who are unlovable are difficult people to love because of their character.

Read Hosea 3:1-3. What must have been on the minds of people who saw Hosea buy Gomer back? How many people understood Hosea's act as an example of God's willingness to take back His unfaithful people, forgive their sins, and heal them from what those sins had done to them?

The law said that Hosea could have stoned Gomer to death. But he brought her back to live as his wife. That is the basic difference between law and grace. The law demands death for the sinner. But grace grants (gives) forgiveness.

What do these verses say about the difference between law and grace? Romans 5:20; Romans 7:5; 1 Corinthians 15:56; Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 2:21.

What does Hosea 2:14, 15 say about the willingness of the God of the Old Testament to forgive? In what ways can you see Jesus in Hosea 2:14, 15?

Israel was often surprised to see how deep God's love and forgiveness were. True, there were moments when the people had to be disciplined to help them see how low they had fallen. But God's purpose was always to help them see His love more clearly. A quick, careless reading of the Old Testament might impress the reader that the God there is

not the same God shown in Jesus. But a careful reading of the Old Testament shows the same forgiving God who helps His people grow into His likeness. He was the same God who passed in front of Moses. He was the same God who met a rebellious people and gently led them step by step back to the kind of relationship He wanted with them.

FRI **ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 552–556.

“As Moses pleaded with God for his people's sake, he lost his shyness. God listened to his pleas and answered his unselfish¹¹ prayer. God had proved His servant. He had tested Moses' faithfulness and love for His unfaithful people. His interest in Israel did not come from selfishness. Moses was more interested in the success of God's people than the personal honor of becoming the father of a powerful nation. God was pleased with Moses' simple faith and honesty. Because Moses was faithful, God decided to give to him the great responsibility of leading Israel to the Promised Land.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 319.

“Few people think about the suffering that sin has caused our Creator. All heaven groaned in Jesus' pain and suffering. But Jesus' suffering did not begin or end with His being a human. The Cross shows how dull we are to the pain that sin has brought to God's heart. Every sinful act, every cruel deed, every

¹¹unselfish—not selfish.

failure of humanity¹² to reach God's ideal, makes Him sad."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the Cross help us understand what sin does to God?
2. Read Daniel 9. Study carefully verses 18 and 19. On what basis is Daniel praying to God for forgiveness? Is Daniel's prayer really based on anything different than what someone in New Testament times would pray for? Explain your answer.
3. The whole idea of forgiveness suggests that there is guilt. For example, does God forgive animals if they steal food or kill someone? Of course not. But why not? It is because the animal cannot make a choice between right and wrong. The animal is not any more guilty and in need of forgiveness than would be a car that kills someone in an accident. But as humans, we need forgiveness from God, because we have been guilty of wrong acts. We, not animals, need forgiveness. What does this teach us about making choices between right and wrong?

¹²humanity—all the people of the world.