

A God Who Repents?

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[Exodus 32:7-14](#), Psalm 51:1-10, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

There are a couple of things that are deeply disturbing about our reading this morning from the Book of Exodus. The first is kind of obvious. We have the image of a God who has just saved a people from lives of slavery and hardship and made them God's own people. And yet we see this same God choosing to devote the whole lot of them to genocidal destruction. **"I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are." God says to Moses, "Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation."**

Why God is Angry

And I realize, of course, that the people of Israel have definitely messed up at this point of the story. God has set before them, in the form of a commandment, the requirement that they must have no other gods before Yahweh. And yet they have created an idol and declared that they trust more in this idol to save them than in the God who has brought them out of Egypt.

So, it is definitely not as if they have done nothing to deserve God's anger with them. But you have got to at least wonder whether the punishment – complete annihilation – fits the crime. Is total destruction justified?

An Extreme Reaction?

Could you imagine any authority figure whose temper was so severe that, if someone showed them a little bit of defiance or failed to follow an instruction, their outbursts of rage killed people? I think that if we saw anyone responding to disobedience in that way, we would find it to be not just unacceptable but criminal. And yet this is the reaction that we see in God.

Stories About People Struggling to Understand their Experiences

But remember what these stories are there to do in the Bible. These are stories that were written by people who were struggling to come to terms with their experiences of God. They were people who had lived through all kinds of troubling circumstances and yet came out of them with the conviction that, somehow, their God had been with them as they passed through those difficult times.

And, pretty clearly, this story was told by people who were disappointed with themselves. They knew that they had failed, that they had not lived up to what God expected of them and they believed they were coming face to face with the consequences.

When these Stories were Created

Most of these stories of the wandering of the people of Israel in the wilderness actually came to be written down while the people of Israel were coming to terms with their defeat and exile by the Babylonian Empire. They were asking themselves why God had allowed such a terrible thing to happen to them and had concluded that it was because they had failed to live up to God's expectations.



Since they had decided that they must have deserved all of the bad things that had happened to them, it made sense to tell a story about a God who was angry with them because that was the only way they could make sense of the things that they were living through.

We All Want to Make Sense of Tragedy

That is actually something that we all do. Today is the anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001. How much energy has been spent in the last twenty-one years trying to make sense of that disaster and why it happened?

We all have a deep need to make sense of the tragedies that we have experienced. Accepting that we may be somehow to blame for it is one of the ways that we do that. Strangely, this can actually be a comforting thought. I mean, it doesn't feel good, of course, to blame yourself, but at least it feels better than the alternative which is to think that tragedy just happens for no reason at all. That seems frighteningly chaotic.

Finding Comfort in an Angry God

This story was told by the people of Israel when they were at a particularly vulnerable moment. Bad things had happened to them, and they needed to understand why. Recognizing their own failure, they needed the image of a God who could not only be angry with them, but who could also be so angry as to consider wiping them out entirely.

They found this to be a comforting image of God because what was the alternative? The alternative was a God who had let such terrible things happen to them out of neglect or disinterest. And so, yes, they did find something oddly comforting in this story because it at least showed that God cared.

But please understand that this does not mean that that was therefore a complete and entirely correct image of God. It was just people trying to make sense of what they were experiencing of God at that moment. That is always a work in progress.

This is a Common Reaction to Difficulty

They are also not the only ones to do this kind of thing as they seek to come to terms with God. I am sure that many of you have known people who have lived through some terrible tragedies in their lives. Perhaps they have come out of abuse or addiction. Maybe they have made some deeply troubling choices that led them into dark paths or maybe they have been deeply damaged by others.

I have noticed that, in the initial phase as they try to heal from that kind of hurt and create some sense of order and morality in their life, it is not uncommon for people to embrace an image of a God who is rigid, inflexible and who has a sense of justice that is hard to satisfy. There is, in such an image of God, something that is deeply helpful to people who are trying to heal in that kind of circumstance.

At the same time, that does not mean that they should remain with that one image of God ever after. In fact, if they are going to mature spiritually, their understanding of God will necessarily change as they do so.

Moses Talks him Out of it

Which brings us to the second troubling thing about this story in Exodus. When God tells Moses that God intends to destroy the people, Moses talks God out of it.

Moses does this by saying, "Don't you have a reputation to maintain? Here you have saved this people from the Egyptians and made them your own. If you destroy them now, the Egyptians are going to

have a field day! They will make fun of your failure to follow through. And what's more, what of all the promises you made to these people's ancestors? Won't that reflect badly on you if you break your solemn promises?" And so, God is persuaded, one might almost say shamed, into changing God's mind.

How Can God Repent?

And that has caused a certain amount of consternation for many Bible readers. "Isn't God.... God?" They may ask. "So how can the mind of the eternal, unchanging and immutable God be changed?" They might even appeal to scripture itself. After all, does it not say in Numbers 23:19, **"God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"**

This story in Genesis is even more troubling in some older translations that translate the concluding verse, quite correctly, as **"And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people."** Somehow the word *repent*, though it essentially means the same thing, feels even more uncomfortable when applied to God!

A Difficult Question

People have long struggled with this part of the story for that very reason. It seems to be saying something about God that is deeply troubling. Some people have tried to explain it away by saying that God never really intended to destroy the people, that he was only testing Moses.

But I don't think that such an explanation takes this scripture seriously. I think that this story is saying something important about the nature of God and to explain that meaning away is to rob it of that power.

People Struggling to Understand their God

Remember how I said that this story functioned for the people who told it? It is a story that people told because they were struggling to come to terms with a terrible tragedy that they had lived through, and they were wondering where their God had been in it. They made sense of that by embracing a view of a God filled with righteous anger who would justly destroy his people for their failures and shortcomings.

Such a view can be comforting when you have lived through a trauma. But that's not the best place to end your spiritual journey, it really is just the beginning of a process of understanding God.

Surprised by Grace

So, what we also see happening in this passage is a people who have been surprised by God's mercy and grace. They have experienced tragedy which has brought them into a recognition of their failure to themselves and to their God.

But, just as they have recognized that they may be worthy of destruction, they have also recognized that God has not destroyed them, that there may yet be a path to redemption and hope for them. And the best way for them to make sense of that is to see that God had every right to wipe them away because of their failures, but that God thought better of it.

God's Unchanging Commitment

This story is not actually about the changeability of God. There is actually something that is deeply unchanging about God in this story because the reason why God ultimately changes God's mind is because of God's longstanding commitments to this people.

To act out the wrath of a moment would be to forget the long-standing covenant that God has made with them, promising to be their God and claiming them as God's people. No, this is not about God changing but rather about God defaulting to God's truer self and deeper commitments.

It is the People's Understanding that Changes

It is not really God who changes in this story, it is the people who see their understanding of God change and grow. Once they were living in the Promised Land and they maybe took God's faithfulness to them for granted. But then they lost the Promised Land which confronted them with the reality of their own failures to live up to the commitments they had made.

Thus was born in them the fear of a vengeful and angry God who wanted to wipe them away. It was, perhaps, a helpful thing for them to believe in that moment of trauma.

But their journey of discovery of who God did not end there. For there, in the land of exile, they met a God who had not forgotten the covenant and whose commitment to them as a people would remain firm despite their failures. In the moment of their greatest fear, they met a God of grace. And it may have been disconcerting and distressing to have to shift their understanding of God in that moment, but it also greatly deepened their experience and understanding of their God.

Are We Worthy of Consequences?

We might be able to learn a great deal from the people who told this story. We too seem to be living in an era when we are coming to terms with our own failure as a people. We are waking up to the uncomfortable truth, for example, that we have not cared for the earth that God has given to us because we have not learned how to live upon it in a sustainable way.

And the sad truth is that we are now living with the consequences of those failures. Extreme weather events, massive forest fires, floods and famines and at least some of the diseases that have been plaguing us are consequences of some of the ways in which we have failed to live well upon this earth. And some are beginning to wonder, to fear, that we might well be wiped from the face of the earth as a consequence of our failure.

The ancient Israelites gathered up those kinds of fears and personified them in the form of an angry God facing off with Moses on Mount Sinai. We, as modern people, may not turn it into that kind of story, but the fear of consequence that we are living with is nevertheless quite real.

Continue Struggling to Understand God

It is a good thing that we are coming to terms with our own failures as a collective human race. And if we are reacting to that with fear in guilt driven action, that might be the start of something better. But I'm not sure that's the end of the spiritual journey we are supposed to be on right now. I hope you don't just stay with the image of an angry God who is ready to wipe us out. Our spiritual journey of discovery has only begun.

I hope you hold on and continue to argue with God – like Moses argued with God on the mountain – because there is another, deeper truth about who God is. God is more than just an angry God intent on punishment. Jesus came to introduce us to a God of compassion and sympathy – a God who understands what it is to be human. Press on, despite the challenges, to know that God. In the very nature of that God is great comfort and actually the best hope that we have for a faithful future.