

Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “The Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6, 7).

IN JULY OF A.D. 144, Marion was condemned as a heretic for teaching that the God of the Old Testament was an evil being who could not be the same loving God of the New Testament.

Though that view is erroneous, some even today tend to think that the God of the Old Testament is not the same God of the New, particularly as revealed by Jesus. Of course, it is the same God—a loving, merciful God who forgives all who come to Him in true penitence and faith, no matter how bad they have been.

This week we will broach God’s forgiving nature as revealed in some books of the Hebrew Bible; in them we will see the love of Christ manifested centuries before Jesus came in the flesh.

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

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.

THE FORGIVING GOD.

“But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath” (Ps. 78:38).

The Bible is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness toward humankind. The theme pulsates through its pages. The reason, of course, is simple. The Bible is a book about God’s interaction with humanity; that is, fallen humanity, a race that through transgression has severed itself from its only Source of life—a race, therefore, in desperate need of God’s forgiveness. In short, we needed forgiveness, and God has supplied that need. If He didn’t, we would have no hope.

Look up these texts: Gen. 39:9; Ps. 51:4; Jer. 51:5; Dan. 9:8; and Zeph. 1:17. What do they all share in common? How do they help us understand why we need divine forgiveness?

When a person violates a criminal law, even if his or her act involved hurting another person, the violation is viewed as an act *against the state*. That person transgressed a law of the state; thus, he or she is deemed as having acted against the state, the one who made the law.

In parallel, sin—whether or not someone else is directly involved—is always an offense against God, the One who established that law as the moral foundation of His government. Now, if all humans sin and all sin is against God, then all have sinned against Him. Is it any wonder, then, that we need His forgiveness?

Fortunately, God is merciful, loving, and compassionate. That is why He is willing to forgive, again and again and again (after all, we sin again and again and again). If He did not forgive, what hope would we have?

The Old Testament abounds with examples of divine forgiveness. It has to, because it is filled with examples of human sin; and were it not for the promise and the reality of forgiveness, such sin would lead to death. The Old Testament is a book filled with hope, because it is a book filled with forgiveness.

It is easy to understand the idea of sinning against another person. You violate, cheat, or steal from him or her, and the hurt can often be seen. But to sin against God? What does that mean? Does sin “hurt” God? If so, in what way? Think about this during the week, write out your thoughts, and share them with your class on Sabbath.

Key Text: Exodus 34:6, 7.

Teachers Aim:

1. To reveal the forgivingness of God.
2. To show that God’s “repentance” is really His “forgiveness.”
3. To help the class understand how God loves the unlovable.

Lesson Outline:

I. God Is Forgiving (Lev. 1:4).

- A. Examples of God’s forgiveness can be found throughout the Old Testament.
- B. God’s interaction with humans keeps the lifeline of forgiveness open.
- C. All humans sin and need forgiveness.
- D. Forgiveness also means “to atone,” “to cleanse,” or “to cover.”

II. The Lord Can Repent (Exod. 32:14).

- A. The Lord intends to destroy the Hebrews for worshipping the golden calf.
- B. Moses pleads with the Lord to forgive the sin of His people and to spare their lives.
- C. God repents when He forgives out of His own mercy.

III. God Loves the Unlovable (Hos. 1:2).

- A. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer parallels Christ’s relationship to Israel.
- B. Despite Gomer’s adultery, the Lord tells Hosea to take her back.
- C. Hosea forgives Gomer and restores her as his wife.

Summary: In Hosea 3:1, the Lord told Hosea to “Go yet, love a woman . . . , yet an adulteress.” As Christ’s church, we have committed spiritual adultery against Him. Yet, like Hosea, Christ continually takes us back, forgives us, and restores us as His bride.

Commentary.

Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible.

Many Christians base their faith and study solely on the events and message of the New Testament. They believe the Old Testament provides little more than historical background. Seventh-day Adventists,

TO BEAR, TO CLEANSE, TO FORGIVE.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness. The word *forgive* in translation often comes from three main words, rich in meaning. Each conveys its own aspect of forgiveness; taken together, they form a nice tapestry that helps us understand the concept as it appears in the Hebrew Bible.

Look up the following texts: Exodus 32:32; Psalm 25:18; Psalm 32:1. The Hebrew word translated there for *forgive* comes from a word whose most basic meaning is “to bear,” “to carry.” In the context of these texts, write out how that basic meaning helps you understand how God forgives:

Look up Deuteronomy 21:8 and Jeremiah 18:23. The word translated for *forgive* here comes from the word that, at its root, means “to atone” (Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 35). This makes sense, because atonement is the foundation of forgiveness. The word also carries the meaning of “to cleanse,” “to wipe off,” and even “to cover” (in Genesis 6:14 the noun and the verb “pitch” come from the same root). Again, write down how knowing these meanings helps you understand the concept of forgiveness.

In Leviticus 4:26, 5:10, 1 Kings 8:30, Psalm 86:5, and Jeremiah 31:34, the Hebrew verb in these verses for *forgive* (by far the most common word) means, basically, “to pardon.”

Take what you have learned from these different root words and the verses they’re used in and write out how all together (look also at the context in which they are used) they give you an understanding of the process of forgiveness, as it appears in the Old Testament. Is the basis of forgiveness any different in the New? If so, what are the differences?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

however, recognize that the plan of salvation is evident throughout the entire Bible. We recognize that events in the Old Testament repeatedly point out God’s willingness to forgive His erring people.

The Bible is clear about our relationship to sin: Romans 3:23 says we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (NIV). (Also see Rom. 3:9; Gal. 3:22.) Furthermore, it is clear that every sin we commit is a sin against God. “When you sin against your brothers in this way . . . you sin against Christ” (1 Cor. 8:12, NIV). “All sin, in its ultimate nature, is sin against God. When convicted by Nathan, David declared, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ (2 Sam. 12:13). Joseph also acknowledged that, should he yield to temptation, his sin would be against God, ‘How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?’ (Gen. 39:9).”—“Against thee, thee only,” in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 755. (Also see Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 117.)

Our sinful nature places us in dire need of forgiveness, without which we are doomed (Rom. 6:23). Our only hope is in God. We have the comfort of knowing that His character is consistent: “I the Lord do not change” (Mal. 3:6, NIV; also see Heb. 13:8; James 1:17). The Old Testament gives us a vivid portrayal of His character. While this portrayal can at times be terrifying (Exod. 15:7; 22:24; Num. 11:33; Josh. 22:20; 2 Chron. 28:11; Job 21:20; etc.), we can take comfort from the evidence that God is willing and eager to forgive us. We can be sure that, when we turn to Him, He will be as eager to forgive us as He was to forgive the Israelite nation for their repeated trespasses.

One of the seeming contradictions of the Bible concerns God’s repentance. Some find it difficult to reconcile statements such as “And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent” (1 Sam. 15:29, KJV; Ezek. 24:14) with “It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king” (1 Sam. 15:11) and “if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them” (Jer. 18:8; also see Ps. 135:14; Jer. 18:10; 26:3; 26:13; 42:10; Jonah 3:9, 10).

The *SDA Bible Dictionary* differentiates between godly repentance and human repentance by saying that “it is in the sense of regret that God is said to repent. . . . He cannot change His purpose, but man, being a free moral agent, can change the outworking of God’s purpose.”—Page 933. “Man’s repentance implies a change of mind. God’s repentance implies a change of circumstances and relations. Man may change his relation to God by complying with the conditions upon which he may be brought into the divine favor, or he may, by his own action, place himself outside the favoring condition.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 630.

The story of Hosea provides a dramatic example of God’s willingness to work with His people so they will desire to comply with His will. God’s love is agonizingly apparent in this story. As the prophet worked through his own painful experiences, he grasped how Israel’s

THE LORD REPENTS (Exodus 32:1-14).

Imagine someone who—having neither seen the Bible nor heard anything about the God revealed in it—found a fragment that contained only Exodus 32:1-14. Write down what this person might think about the Lord. Why could this section alone possibly give the wrong impression about the character of God?

Most people do not believe that Moses, by pleading with the Lord, changed God's mind about wiping out the Hebrews because of their worship of the golden calf. Look at what the Lord had done for them through the miraculous deliverance from Egypt after centuries there (Exod. 12:41), look at the swiftness of their apostasy (Exod. 32:8), and look at the fact that they sinned despite the clear command of God (Exod. 20:3-6). Nevertheless, even after all this, God was willing to forgive them. Thus, far from presenting a harsh God who relents only because some sinful human being asks Him to, this story is an example of God's willingness to forgive His people, even though they do not deserve it.

We believe that the God presented in this story is Jesus of Nazareth. See John 8:58, 14:9, and 1 Corinthians 10:1-10. What examples can you find from the life of Jesus that reveal this same willingness to forgive the undeserving?

Many are confused by the phrase found in Exodus 32:14 that says the Lord "repented" of His intention to wipe out the Israelites. How does an all-powerful God, who knows the beginning from the end, "repent" from something? Even if one can find a translation with another verb (the NIV uses the past tense of the verb "relent"), how can we understand this idea of God, in a sense, changing His mind?

The best answer seems to be that the words *the Lord repented* are a feeble attempt to express the divine will in human language. God "repents," not when He changes His mind but when, instead of bringing wrath and punishment on sinners as they deserve, He forgives out of His own mercy and graciousness.

Imagine that you met a person who knew nothing else about our Lord 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 fuller account about the character of God? What lesson can we learn, too, about the danger of building a theology from a single passage or a single story?

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repeated sin affected the God who loved them. "Through all his writing Hosea depicts the yearning love of God for His wayward people." —*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 886. Like Hosea, God willingly accepted His people each and every time they returned to Him, regardless of the evil they had committed.

Forgiveness in the Old Testament does not differ from forgiveness

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY**Texts for Discovery: Exodus 34:5-7; Hosea 1:2-8; 11:1-11.**

1. There are a fair number of examples in the Old Testament (as well as in the New Testament) in which God seems to be rather unforgiving. Review the story of Adam's and Eve's fall, for example (Genesis 3). What was the evidence that God had indeed forgiven Adam and Eve? Is God's justice always redemptive?
2. God was able to forgive David's adulterous affair, with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11; 12). But still, David's sin had consequences that could not be undone. What does this say about the limits of God's forgiveness? What about our ability to forgive?
3. Forgiveness is about relationships. Sin damages our relationships with God and our relationships with others. Forgiveness helps to restore those relationships. Although the effects of damaged relationships often never go away, how are people involved in our lives—either directly or indirectly—affected by our demonstrations of forgiveness? Can forgiveness ever be misdirected or mishandled?
4. Isn't using the example of Hosea and Gomer to illustrate forgiveness extreme? Yet, isn't that the point? God's forgiveness is extreme, extravagant to the point of being outrageous. Invite your class to share briefly some of the struggles they've had forgiving someone who wronged them.
5. The story of Hosea and Gomer is left unfinished; we don't know whether Hosea's forgiveness created lasting change in Gomer, or not. Canvass your class and ask how many think Gomer responded to Hosea's offers of forgiveness and how many think she ignored his attempts at reconciliation. Have them give other Old-Testament examples where God's forgiveness did have its desired effect.

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE: PART 1.

“The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea. And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord” (Hos. 1:2).

Many are the ways in which the Lord teaches us what forgiveness is about, what it means, and what results it brings. The story of Hosea and his adulterous wife dramatically demonstrates some of these important truths.

Read Hosea 1. Why would God ask someone to marry an adulterous woman? What point was the Lord making?

How many people would marry someone, knowing beforehand, that this person was going to commit adultery at some point in the marriage? Yet, this is what Hosea did; and his story presents a graphic message, not only about sin but about forgiveness, as well.

Think about it: There are few ways in which a husband-and-wife relationship (symbolic of the intimacy God wants with His people) can be more violated than in the case of adultery. The key word here is *relationship*. Sin, at its core, damages our relationship with God and with each other. Sin is a corruption of the entire being, one that results only in conflict and turmoil within ourselves and with others. A person becomes incapable of trusting or being trusted, loving or being loved. Sin is not just what we do; it reflects what we are. Adultery, as presented here in Hosea, is just one dramatic manifestation of sin and of how it impacts our relationships, not only with each other but with God.

“O miserable man, what a deformed monster sin has made you! God has made you ‘little lower than the angels’; sin has made you little better than the devils.”—Joseph Alleine, quoted in Michael Brown, Go and Sin No More (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1999), p. 20.

Only as we understand just how damaging sin is to us can we understand what it cost to forgive us our sin. Look at the Cross and what happened there. Jesus, equal with God Himself, bore in Himself the penalty for our sins—the only way these sins could be forgiven. What, then, does that tell us about just how evil sin must be, that it took so much to be able to forgive it?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

in the New Testament. The God of Israel was willing to change the circumstances and His relations with the Israelites when they changed their hearts toward Him through repentance. The God of the New Testament assures us that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NIV).

WITNESSING

Many people will not repent of their sins, because they do not believe God will forgive them. Someone once said, “It doesn’t matter what I do, I’m lost anyway.” Many people *will* be lost, simply because they believe they will. They really don’t understand God’s forgiveness. God will forgive *all* our sins. As God’s witnesses, we must tell others that even though God hates the sin, He loves the sinner and longs to forgive and save us from our sins.

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God’s law demanded justice, but His love provided grace. Disobedience to God called for *retribution*. Humanity had to pay the penalty for sin. But even at the beginning of time, a merciful, loving God had a plan of *restoration*.

The God of the Old Testament stretched out His arm through time into the New Testament, and there He placed His own Son. Christ came as a Man to die for the sins of all humankind. But not only did Christ die for our sins, He freed us of our sins by taking them upon Himself. We no longer need to bear the guilt of sin. At the Cross there is both retribution and restoration. There is punishment for sin and deliverance from sin.

The Lord is the God of the Old *and* the New Testament. He requires obedience to His law and demands justice when that law is broken; but He also shows mercy by forgiving us when we disobey His law and promises to restore us at His second coming to a sinless state.

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE: PART 2 (HOSEA 3).

“The Lord said to me, ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes’” (Hos. 3:1, NIV).

Try to catch what is going on in this story. Gomer openly commits adultery, and yet the Lord tells Hosea to take her back, despite such a blatant violation of their marriage vows.

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

According to the letter of the law, Hosea could have stoned her to death; instead, he brought her back to live as his wife. That is the basic difference between law and grace: The law demands death for the transgressor, grace grants forgiveness.

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

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt’ ” (Hos. 2:14, 15, NIV). What does this text say about the willingness of the God of the Old Testament to forgive? In what ways can you see Jesus in these words?

Time after time Israel was surprised by the depth of God’s love and forgiveness. True, there were moments when the people had to be disciplined in order for them to perceive how low they had fallen, but it was always for the purpose of helping them see God’s love more clearly. A superficial reading of the Old Testament might give the reader the impression that God is not the same deity manifested in Jesus Christ. However, a careful reading unveils the same forgiving Deity who—in order to help His people grow into the likeness of the God who passed in front of Moses—met a rebellious people where they were in their social and spiritual development and gently led them step by step in an effort to bring them up to the level of the relationship He envisioned.

LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: When criminals want to extort money from the wealthy, they don’t kidnap the maid’s children. They need the leverage of familial love. What light does this shed on Satan’s perceptions about how God values humanity? What light does this shed on Moses’ willingness to sacrifice himself? (See Exod. 32:32.) What words repeatedly come into this conversation?

story of Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska, includes the famous scene of a boy carrying his brother on his back and saying, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.” How does a mortal become a heavyweight-burden bearer, a forgiver? “True believer” is a common term. Can a person be a forgiver without first becoming a “true believer” in God?

Thought Questions:

1. Joseph had been wronged by a list of people, including his brothers, Potiphar’s wife, and Potiphar. Yet, God used Joseph mightily. Although the Bible doesn’t specifically say Joseph forgave each of the people who wronged him, can we assume that he did because God used him? Does a record of forgiveness play into God’s choice of people to be collaborators with Christ?
2. Do you have a Joseph-size capacity for forgiveness? Is it easier for you to forgive relatives or people outside your family? Have you set boundaries on forgiveness? Who is Joseph in your family and who needs to develop the spirit of forgiveness?
3. A movie that focuses on the

Application Questions:

1. Thesaurus listings for *forgive* include absolve, pardon, release, acquit, condone, excuse, extricate, liberate, free, loose, discharge, exculpate, and relent. Based on this week’s lesson and your study of each word listed here, circle the words that apply to God’s forgiving you. Are there words that are inappropriate in general? Are there other synonyms that could be considered?
2. Fill in the blank. As a mustard seed is to faith, _____ is to forgiveness. Explain your choice of comparisons.
3. Symbols used in Christianity include a flame, a ship’s anchor, and a dove. What symbol could be used for forgiveness?

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

As Moses interceded for Israel, his timidity was lost in his deep interest and love for those for whom he had, in the hands of God, been the means of doing so much. The Lord listened to his pleadings, and granted his unselfish prayer. God had proved His servant; He had tested his faithfulness and his love for that erring, ungrateful people, and nobly had Moses endured the trial. His interest in Israel sprang from no selfish motive. The prosperity of God's chosen people was dearer to him than personal honor, dearer than the privilege of becoming the father of a mighty nation. God was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and his integrity, and He committed to him, as a faithful shepherd, the great charge of leading Israel to the Promised Land."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 319.

"Few give thought to the suffering that sin has caused our Creator. All heaven suffered in Christ's agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity. The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God. Every departure from the right, every deed of cruelty, every failure of humanity to reach His ideal, brings grief to Him."—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Look at the second quote by Ellen White. How does the Cross help us understand what sin does to God?
2. Read Daniel's prayer in chapter 9. Look specifically at verses 18, 19. On what basis is Daniel appealing to God for forgiveness? How does that appeal fit in with our understanding of the gospel? In other words, is his appeal really based on anything different than what someone in New Testament times would appeal to? Explain your answer.
3. Think about this: The whole concept of forgiveness implies the existence of 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 is amoral; it is not capable of making a moral choice. It is no more guilty and in need of forgiveness than would be a car that kills someone in an accident. Yet as human beings, we need forgiveness from God, because we have been guilty of wrong acts. The fact that we (as opposed to animals) need forgiveness implies what about us as moral beings?