

# EXODUS

תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה

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## Exodus 32:11-14

### Prayer and the Plan of God

We are going back to Exodus 32 today.

One of the things God is doing in the Exodus and in our lives is driving home the fact that He is unique and distinct from everything else that's we call a god. He isn't just one more god in a pantheon of gods, He doesn't function like any of the gods people have invented or sculpted or worshipped before.

In their day, people were very accustomed to gods that they made with their hands, gods that were limited, gods that were local and territorial. And in our day, we become very accustomed to the worship of versions of Jesus that are very limited, very small. This popular version of "Jesus" gets added to our lives so we can be well-rounded, and so we can have some spirituality, but certainly isn't above all else and separate from all else, and changing and defining everything else like the real Jesus in the Bible.

So one of the things that the Bible does for us is drive home the distinction of Jesus from all other gods. It does this by communicating to us some of His unique attributes, it tells us what He is like, so we don't get him confused with other gods.

And it is so important that we know what He is like and not like, especially if we believe that our Christianity is all about a relationship with God. To have a relationship with someone, you have to be learning what they're like and not like. And as we pray, its important to know who we're praying to and what the purpose of our prayers even is.

Last week, we saw that Moses had gone up onto Mount Sinai, was gone for 40 days, and the people grew restless, so they asked Aaron to make them a different version of the same God - one that would go where they wanted, and one that would free them from any obligations to listen to his words. So Aaron obliged and made them a golden calf. In response, they turned the camp of God's people into a giant frat party.

So God told Moses, "They've betrayed me, they've broken the covenant, they're cheating with another god. I'm going to wipe them out and start over with you, Moses."

And then Moses prayed. Here's how it went:

**Exodus 32:11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume**

**them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.**

So Moses, the one who was righteous in this whole thing, prayed and asked God to turn from his anger, to relent from what He had decided to do to the people. And God does! Which is really strange.

### **A. The Immutability of God**

Because the Bible teaches that God doesn't change. And Moses knows this. Later on he records these words:

**Numbers 23:19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?**

Moses knows God doesn't change His mind. He doesn't make a plan and not follow through. He is unchangeable, unwavering.

The New Testament affirms the same thing:

**James 1:17 "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.**

God isn't a God who changes. It's His attribute of *immutability*.

God has no need to change, so why would He?

God is already complete and perfect, there's nothing to improve. He couldn't be more loving, He couldn't make better decisions. There is nothing better for God to become, there is no potential in God.<sup>1</sup> For God to change would be to become less perfect.

You can't say to someone, "You're perfect" and also say "there are some things about you that need to change." Both can't be true.

And we can't say that God is perfect and also that God changes. And this would include changing His mind about things.

He won't be getting any new information that will make him change his mind. We change our minds all the time when we learn something new. But what could ever cause God to change his mind? He already has all the information.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas said that God is *actus purus*, or "pure act", and therefore cannot be improved by any change.

There's no angle on any situation He hasn't considered. There is nothing in the future He doesn't know about. Nothing has ever occurred to Him, nothing has surprised Him, and nobody has ever informed Him of anything. So why would He ever change His mind?

Which is more than just an interesting thing to think about.

### **It matters for our prayers. Do they make a difference or not?**

If God already has a plan, already knows everything, and never changes, why should we bother praying? Do we really think it will matter if we pray, when God already has his mind made up about all things?

If my kids ask me for something and I say no, it's allowable for them to try to make a case for their request most of the time. But if we talk about it for awhile and I hear them out, I may eventually say, "My mind is made up." Which means that's the final answer and the time for making a case is over. That's when the gavel comes down.

But God, who knows all things and never changes, must already have His mind made up about everything. There's nothing left for Him to consider, nothing new we are going to tell Him.

So why would we pray?

And many of us have probably been discouraged from praying because of this - why pray when God has it all figured out and planned out already?

And even if we do decide to pray, what kind of being are we praying to? If He doesn't change, are we praying to a stoic, emotionless deity? If God can never be surprised or shocked or disappointed the same way we can, do we relate to God like we relate to a rock? We can't change it, it won't respond to us (because it can't change,) is there any point in talking to it? Is God more like the Volleyball, Wilson, on Castaway that makes us feel better because we're talking to something, but we won't have a real relationship with Him?

Passages like this one in Exodus, and about a dozen others where God is said to change His mind, or repent, or regret something, are all given to us so that we don't think of God as an inanimate object and so, whatever it means that God has a perfect plan and never changes, it doesn't mean that prayer doesn't matter.

But we tend to allow the pendulum to swing from one side to the other. We either affirm that God is in total control, knows all things, plans all things, so prayers don't matter, or it swings the opposite direction to what's called Open Theism, which says God doesn't know the future because it is not a thing to be known yet, and all the info we are learning, God is learning as He goes too. Both extremes are errors and have at their heart an incomplete view of God.

The Bible affirms God's complete knowledge of all things, even in the future, His control of all things, and, at the same time, His responsiveness to our prayers. Making Him a much bigger and more amazing God than maybe we had ever thought.

## **B. The Omniscience of God**

The Bible does affirm that God knows all things, past, present, and future. This is called God's omniscience. God doesn't need to learn anything, He isn't dependent on the creation that He made for His completion in any way. So it is impossible for God not to know everything all at once. And because God is eternal, He knows everything about the future as well.

**Jeremiah 23:23-24** "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away?  
<sup>24</sup> Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

**Proverbs 15:3** The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.

Verses like these say that God knows and sees all things.

But, some would say, that doesn't include the future because the future does not exist yet.

And they mean well. Life is full of suffering, and when you sit with someone who has experienced unexpected suffering, they'll often ask, "Why didn't God stop this from happening?" And, in an effort to get God off the hook, some will say, "God didn't know the future either, He didn't know what was unknowable, so you can't blame Him for your accident."

And that may help someone walk away thinking, "OK, I can't be mad at God." But you've created a new problem. Because now they have a God who doesn't know what the future holds, and who can be just as blindsided as they are when tragedy strikes. And does a God like that give any comfort?

The Bible doesn't give every answer for why God allows suffering. But the answer is not that He didn't know it would happen.

**ISAIAH 46:9-10** "for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, 10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

There are dozens of passages that affirm God's complete knowledge of the future. In his lifetime, Jesus perfectly predicted the future, the book of Revelation tells us what the ultimate future holds, there are countless examples of God knowing the future in

scripture. If we're going to the Bible as the authority, which we do, then we can't say that God doesn't know the future. We're forced to say He knows the end from the beginning.

OK, that's knowing the future, but can we really say God is in control of the future?

There's a big difference between knowing something and being in control of it.

But the Bible affirms not only God's knowledge of the future, but sovereignty over it, control of it.

### **C. The Sovereignty of God**

He's the God that Jesus talked about in Luke 12, who is concerned for even the most insignificant details in His creation:

**Luke 12:6-7 "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."**

Sparrows, which according to Jesus here, are worth less than a dime a dozen. Just under a nickel a dozen here. They're not exotic birds, they're one of the most common animals. They are pests because they're super adaptable. They eat food scraps and crowd out other birds in areas. They're essentially the mice of the sky. And every one of them has God's full attention.

So that's the degree of God's attention to His creation. And Jesus says here, "you are of more value than many of them." In other words, if God's full attention is on the diseased sky rat, certainly His attention is on you. Fully, completely, always. That's the level of God's involvement in creation.

And that involvement also involves control of even what we think is random:

**Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.**

So even casting lots, our equivalent would be rolling dice, the thing that appears to be left the most to chance, is being guided by the Lord. What we think is random is being steered by a God who is over everything.

Does God really plan out the details of life like that?

He has to, because you can't plan the ends and not plan the means. God has a perfect plan for the future, and to get there, He has to plan all of the events that will lead to that future.

*This summer we took our family on a road trip to Virginia - which included seeing my grandmother in Williamsburg, some sightseeing near DC, and a couple days at Virginia Beach. And the end goal was we're going to Virginia. But for that to happen, we had to have a cooler full of food. We had to have a budget. We had to plan hotels for the way there, and with 4 kids, it's tough because most places only allow 3. So we had to plan who are we sneaking in? Who's sleeping in the tub?*

*Up until a few years ago, you also had to plan the drive. We used to go to triple A and get a trip tik, a map you had to follow to get places. It was like GPS on paper, and it didn't know where you were so you had to plan. Now we don't have to plan those means.*

*But we couldn't just say, "We're going to Virginia." You can't plan the ends and not plan the means.*

To declare "we're going to Virginia" doesn't do any good if you aren't willing to do the things that will get you to Virginia.

For God to plan the ends, He must plan the means.

We cling to the promise that God has planned a good end for us:

**Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

It takes some significant attention to detail to make all things work together for our good. God can't be a God who just promises that it'll all work out in the end but then doesn't work any of the details out. He has to know all things and control all things.

Which means He must be a very big God. In our day, we drift toward having a very small view of God and a very big view of man. I'm sovereign, I'm the master of my destiny, and if God is in the picture at all, He is my good-luck charm or Dumbo's magic feather to help me get to where I want to go. He's my inspiration in my quest to be awesome. He's like Tony Robbins in the sky.

We have a small God and a big me.

But the picture that the Bible presents of God is the opposite of that. It presents a big God and a small me.

Which is good news. Because if I have to be the god in this relationship, if I have to be the big one and He is just a good-luck charm, then that puts pressure on me to work all things together for my good. And I can't do that. I can't be in control of enough, anticipate enough, think through enough, plan enough, manipulate enough to ensure it will all go how I want it to go.

But we try. When we remove God (in our minds) from His position as the Sovereign King over all things, we treat that like a job opening. We try to fill that void and we are bad at it. And so much of our anxiety and worry comes from not believing God is in control, and that therefore we have to be.

But this mind-blowingly big view of God, of a God who is in control of all things, yet in some unfathomable way not the author of evil Himself, a God who is shaping all things for His glory and who invites us into that story for our good, is the view of God presented by scripture.

He must be a God who is fully in control. Otherwise, the promises are meaningless, there's nothing underneath them, it is just wishful thinking.

Imagine you go to the hospital with some mystery illness. It's scary, you wonder if you're going to make it because the symptoms are so severe and strange. So I come in, and I'm not exactly a doctor - I have a lapsed Red Cross First Aid certification from 1996. So I come in and I say, "I looked at your charts, and this is going to be OK." That shouldn't give you any hope. I'm just trying to make you feel better with some happy thoughts and optimistic sentiments. I don't know what's going to happen any more than you do.

But if the doctor comes in and says, "I did the bloodwork, this disease is not as scary as it seems, I see it all the time, and you need to take this pill and this will be going away tomorrow. It's 100% curable, this is nothing to worry about, this is going to be OK." That promise, coming from the doctor, is no longer just sentiment, because it was given by someone who knows this kind of thing, knows how to control it, cures it all the time, understands it inside and out. He isn't just trying to impart some optimism, he is actually in control and doing the curing himself.

For God to tell us “all things work together for good” and for that to be anything more than him just trying to make us more optimistic, He must be in control of what He is promising. He has to be able to deliver.

If His promises matter at all, He must be a God over all things, without a rogue electron in the universe. Everything must be under His control, everything planned.

An immutable, all knowing, sovereign God is the God we need, and according to scripture, the God we have.

OK, but what about the change of mind here in Exodus? And in about a dozen other places. Places like:

**Jonah 3:10 <sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.**

How can we affirm that God doesn't change, but then, a bunch of times, say that He changed His mind, or say things like He regretted that He made man (Genesis 6:6), or that He regretted making Saul king?

How can He already be perfect in his knowledge, but change His mind? And perfect in His control, but change His plan? How can both be true?

There are a couple of explanations for that.

Let me show you the one in 1 Samuel where God says that He regretted making Saul king:

**1 Samuel 15:10 <sup>10</sup> The word of the LORD came to Samuel: <sup>11</sup>“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.”**

But then, just a few verses later, it says:

**1 Samuel 15 <sup>28</sup> And Samuel said to him,“The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. <sup>29</sup> And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”**



So Samuel says that God regrets, but then also says He doesn't regret like a man does. There's a type of regret He has, but it isn't the same as ours.

So when God changes it isn't at all like we change. We change our minds when we get new information. You can think highly of someone and want to spend time with them, and then learn something awful about them that completely changes your mind. And the reason you change is because you were limited in your knowledge before.

That can't be true of God - He knows everything about us. He wasn't at all surprised at how Saul turned out. In fact, He had said it would go that way.

But he will look on us with joy one day and displeasure the next. But that is because we change our posture toward Him, it isn't because He got new information. So when we are in rebellion against God, He will treat us like we're in rebellion. When we are not, He will treat us like we are not. But all along, he knew what we would be from day to day, and always related to us accordingly.

If you take, for example, the moon. The moon doesn't change. It's a big round rock in the sky. But every night we look up and it changes from our point of view because of our angle. So it changes but really doesn't change at all.

In the same way, our posture toward God changes. And God has said He will relate to us differently based on what our posture is. He can be pleased with me because of my faithfulness one day, but displeased because of a new unfaithfulness in me tomorrow. God hasn't changed - he is pleased with faith and displeased with lack of faith. But I've changed, which means I can expect God to be differently disposed toward me.

And that was all fully known by God ahead of time.

So God is the same in His essence, there is nothing new in Him. But He isn't a stoic God or a rock that doesn't feel emotions. He has real personality and will relate to us in different ways depending on our posture.

*If I invite all of my neighbors over to my house for a party, I will not include the people who aren't my neighbors. Which means most of you wouldn't be invited. But if you move to my street, you're now invited. I haven't changed, but the way I relate to you has changed.*

So that's one shot at an explanation. And it's a good one because it means we can expect God to be very personal - He is a God who can be happy and sad, who does interact with us differently when we interact differently with Him. But nothing of His essence changes. He is immutable, but not immobil. He is fully aware of everything that is coming, but not dispassionate in how that affects Him.

Another explanation is that any time God reveals Himself to us, He has to dumb it down so we can comprehend it. And He will often use anthropomorphisms, where He explains Himself in human terms so we can at least understand something. There are passages in the Old Testament where, even though God is spirit, he talks about his strong arms, or his eyes that are in all the earth as we read in proverbs. He isn't making a claim about his biceps or his eyeballs, he is explaining Himself to us in human terms so we can relate.

So explaining his relationship to us like changing His mind is the best thing for us to think and understand, given our limitations in understanding Him.

There is some mystery in this for sure. But God clearly wants us to relate to Him like our prayers matter, like they make a difference.

Jesus told this parable in **Luke 18** **“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. 2 He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. 3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” 6 And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”**

Jesus wants us to know that persistent prayer to God does matter, it does move His hand. If an unrighteous judge will respond to the persistent request of a bothersome widow, how much more will a righteous God respond to his children who are making requests of Him?

But again, how can that be? If God grants a request to prayer, the butterfly effect of that will certainly screw up His plans for the future! We've seen the movies where Marty goes back in time, changes something, and now, back in the future, Biff is running Hill Valley and it's a den of crime and corruption.

One little changed action can radically alter the future.

The explanation is encouraging. God has fully planned the future, He has fully planned what He will do, and has also fully planned every prayer we pray that He will be really responding to.

Yes, He has planned what He will do. And has planned the prayers that made a difference in that plan. God has planned the ends and has also planned the means, which are, in part, the prayers of His people.

Which can be a huge incentive for us to pray.

So God says, for example, I am going to bring this one stubborn person into relationship with myself. And to “go on that trip” I’m going to need to plan everything it takes. And it takes the prayers of my people. So I’m going to have to move Jim to pray. And Jim prays, maybe thinking because it was his own idea, but really God had planned that prayer all along because God responds to prayer and will have Jim praying so when God saves Bill over there, God will get more glory.

When we pray, we should be thinking, “God planned that I would pray because God answers prayers. This is a means God uses to bring about His good in the world. God answers prayer, God responds to prayer, God so values prayer that He has determined that much of the good He does in the world He will only do in response to prayer, so this praying that I’m doing is a big deal, it does matter.

**James 5:16 “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”**

**1 Peter 3:12 “ For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”**

God’s ears are open to our prayers, prayers have great power. God has ordained that His working in the world is often in response to prayers, so pray. And believe, while you do, that God planned that prayer from the foundation of the world as His means to accomplish things.

Ignore the mockers of our day who dismiss thoughts and prayers as powerless gestures.

Keep asking and seeking and knocking and it will be given to you.

Be like the persistent widow.

Make a case to God like Moses did here based on God's attributes. Moses says, "God I know who you are and what you've promised, so please, in light of those attributes, have mercy on this people."

Since the cross of Jesus, we have access to God like Moses did. And since the cross of Jesus, we know even more of what God is like than He did, which should give us even more confidence in prayer.

Moses made His case to God knowing that God cares about His glory, that God is true to His promises, and so can we. But we can plead with God knowing the heart of God that has been revealed to us in the Gospel.

**Romans 8:32 "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"**

If He gave us His son, an infinitely valuable gift, of course He'll give us every other accessory we need to enjoy Him fully. We can approach Him with courage because we have been cleansed, we have been called his sons and daughters, and we know his kindness and mercy like nobody in the Old Testament ever could.

In the Gospel, God showed his incredible kindness. He sent His only son to die so whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. And he did it while we were still sinful.

**Romans 5:8 "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."**

So if He sent His son to us out of love while we were still sinful, we can approach Him knowing that God has a heart of a Father to us even when we are sinful. Often, our sense that we've failed so badly keeps us from prayer - how could I pray when I've failed Him?

The Gospel we believe says that God sent His son to die for us while we were rebellious against Him. Surely He will answer prayers when we have failed in our struggle to be holy.

So we can go to Him, confessing sin, knowing our guilt, but still boldly bringing our requests to Him. We know how for us God is, we know how God works all things

together for our good, we are approaching a loving Father. We aren't at Mt. Sinai where there's only smoke and rumbling, but Mt. Zion where there is joy in His presence. So we should pray more than Moses.

More than anything, it's the gospel that drives our prayer life. We believe the Gospel that says that Jesus died and rose again so we could be forgiven and have relationship with God, so we approach God knowing his heart toward us.

We as Christians know God is powerful because He raised Jesus from the dead. If his power raised Him from the dead, we should pray, knowing we are tapping in to that kind of power in our time of need.

We as Christians believe that Spirit prays for us, that Jesus is always interceding for us. When we pray, we are just joining in prayers already in progress and even if we have no confidence that God would listen to me, certainly God will listen to His only Son who is praying for me.

In Jesus, God has shown us that He isn't a stoic emotionless compassionless object, because in Christ, God became one of us. He was tempted like we are. He was tired like we are. He was sick like we are. He had sick friends, He had friends die, He experienced all of the challenges we experience. So knowing God in Christ like we do, we know we are approaching a sympathetic High Priest, one who has been there. Not only did God show us that He isn't an emotionless rock, He showed us that He is moved by weakness and need, He is compassionate, He weeps with those who weep, He rejoices with those who rejoice. We are praying to a real Divine Person, not an object in the sky.

And when we pray, He is our advocate, our defense attorney before the Father. He is constantly for us.

We all know we don't pray as we should, we go long seasons without much prayer, but what we know in the Gospel is that that hasn't stopped Jesus from praying for us. When we come back to Him, He isn't saying, "Oh, now you pray!" He has been praying all along and He is glad when we join Him. As always, the gaps in our prayer life have been filled in to overflowing by the prayers of Christ in our behalf.

Our lack of prayer is a lack of belief in all Jesus is for us, and when the Gospel becomes more real to us and our faith becomes stronger, our lives will be characterized by prayer, like Paul said in

**Ephesians 6:18 "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints"**

And God promises to listen, to answer for our good, to comfort us, to pray for us, to know perfectly the best answer and give us only that. He is alive, He is active, He doesn't

change but He is on the move, giving us a kingdom for his own glory, and He is using our prayers as part of his plan to build.

God wants us to know what He is like, and He wants us to pray.

And while we can't comprehend that God is fully in control, totally immutable, but also moved by prayer, we aren't supposed to wait until we comprehend it all to act.

We would have to be omniscient ourselves to fully grasp His omniscience. So we don't wait for full understanding of things to pray, we pray in faith, just trusting Him.

And the cross has shown us that we have every reason to trust Him.

#### Scriptures Referenced:

Exodus 32:11-14

Numbers 23:19

James 1:17

Jeremiah 23:23-24

Proverbs 15:3

Isaiah 46:9-10

Proverbs 16:33

Luke 12:6-7

Romans 8:28

Jonah 3:10

1 Samuel 15:10-11

1 Samuel 15:28-29

Luke 18:1-8

James 5:16

1 Peter 3:12

Romans 8:32

Romans 5:8

Ephesians 6:18

#### Questions for Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) How does the Gospel affect your prayer life?
- 2) What are the impediments to prayer in your life? What excuses do you make for prayerlessness?
- 3) How does knowing that Jesus is always praying for us affect how we pray?
- 4) What burdens are you carrying that could be committed to God in prayer?