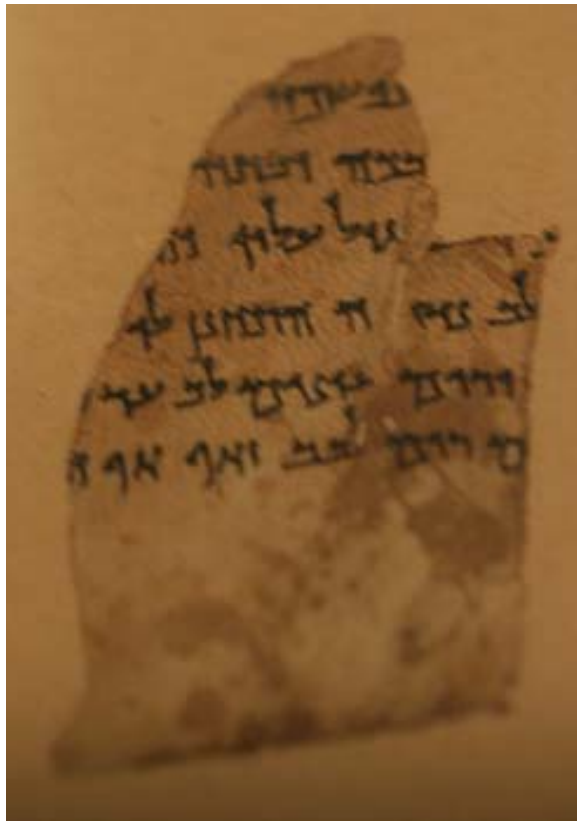


*The Covenant Pulpit*



# EXODUS

*Possessing the Promises*

“BETRAYAL”  
EXODUS 32

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Is there any pain more excruciating than betrayal? Playwright Steven Dietz captures its devastation in these words:

“One should rather die than be betrayed. There is no deceit in death. It delivers precisely what it promises. Betrayal though is the willful slaughter of hope.”

Betrayal rips out your guts. I first felt its piercing pain after my mother abandoned me when I was six years-old. That betrayal was like a splinter of glass that worked its way deep inside my heart. Daily I fantasized that she would come back, but she never did.

At nine years of age, I dared hope again. My foster parents promised to adopt me. He took me fishing and told me he would love me forever. But, when she gave birth to a son, I was no longer his little boy. A few weeks later, a welfare worker showed up while he was at work and I was carted off to another foster home. I didn't even get to say goodbye to the man who promised to love me forever. I never saw him again.

The English writer John LeCarre wrote, “Betrayal can only happen if you love.” Years ago a partner in ministry gave me a beautiful card in which he spoke of friendship and vowed his commitment. He hugged me and said, “I love you brother.” He had already set in motion a plot to destroy my ministry. After that, I viscerally felt these famous lines:

Jesus to Judas: “Do you betray me with a kiss?”

St. Paul in prison: “Demus for the love of this world has left me.”

David's lament to his betrayer: “But you were my friend with whom I shared sweet fellowship as we walked to God's house.”

Julius Caesar's to one of his assassins: “Et tu Brute?”

Surely Moses must have felt the back stab of betrayal. He had given his life to liberate his people. He had risked everything to go up into the dark clouds of Mt. Sinai. He knew that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a Living God. Yet he walked right into the blazing furnace of God's glory to receive the Law for their good. Never did a pastor love his people more than Moses loved them. But they betrayed that love. Imagine the pain that pierced his heart when God said in Exodus 32:7&8,

“Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’”

Betrayal is always devastating. But, when those you love most betray your trust, the pain is always worse. Moses would agree with a wry comment made by Benjamin Franklin: "God defend me from my friends; from my enemies I can defend myself."

I'll bet you've experienced the pain that Moses felt on Mt. Sinai. Maybe your storehouse is filled with unwanted memories: promises broken, hopes gone awry, dreams dashed, trust betrayed, and friendships lost. Every one of us has been betrayed by someone. Worse, we have all betrayed others. We can say "amen" to Sigmund Freud's famous observation: "Betrayal oozes out of every pore of our being."

Here's the drama at Mt. Sinai: how will Moses respond to his betrayal? That's the challenge for all of us who have been betrayed. Will we let it paralyze us, embitter us, or cause us to focus inwardly on our own hurts rather than look onward in hope? There are few truths more critical to our spiritual journey than the twelfth principle of Exodus:

**Our heart's condition is measured best when it is breaking most.**

Remember what John LeCarre said: "Betrayal can only happen if you love." When you give your heart to others you put them in a position to break it. The Irish poet Oscar Wilde wrote, "Each man kills the thing he loves most." If your heart is broken enough, you will be tempted to put a protective wall around it. Tennessee Williams penned these words:

"If we are going to survive, we have to distrust each other. It's our only defense against betrayal."

A Russian proverb says, "Trust can take years to build, but only a second to break." I remember counseling a Christian couple. When she discovered his unfaithfulness it broke her heart. He was begging her to give him another chance. I'll never forget what she said to him:

"The day you betrayed my trust was the day I lost all trust in you. I believed that you would take care of my heart and that's why I gave it to you. Well, I'm taking it back today. I'll never give you another chance to break it again."

People ask me how I managed to overcome the betrayals in my childhood to still give my heart away. What's the secret of turning wounded yesterdays into a healthy today? By God's grace I have learned to put into practice Moses' attitudes and actions in the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Exodus. If you want to overcome a broken heart, here's what you need to do:

**1. Don't make it personal: betrayal is bigger than you.**

When people betray us, we personalize it. We make it all about *us*. We obsess about the way *we've* been hurt. We focus on what needs to be

done to make *us* feel better. Our fallen nature is so *self*-focused. Nothing illustrates it better than a line from the movie, *Beaches*. Bette Midler plays a self-obsessed drama queen. In one scene, she talks incessantly about herself. Finally she says to her friend, "Enough talk about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think about me?" We laugh because we see too much of ourselves in Bette Midler's character.

If people aren't friendly, we think, "Is there something wrong with me?" instead of, "I wonder if they're okay?" When others hurt us, we fixate on *our* wounds rather than *their* pain that caused them to lash out at us. If someone else is getting all the attention, we think, "What about me?" Maybe that's why one of my favorite movies is entitled, "What about Bob?" But it's never about Bob. Neither is it about Moses. Sure, he's feels betrayed and hurt. But Moses sees immediately that it is first and foremost about God's glory. The LORD says in verse eight,

"They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel who brought you up out of Egypt.'"

They have betrayed God by reducing his glory to that of a miniature golden bull. They have denied his grace by worshipping the works of their own hands. They have cheapened a blood sacrifice, intending to prefigure the crucifixion of Christ, by sprinkling it on the altar of an idol. And they have trashed God's goodness by praising their bull god as the one who brought them up out of Egypt.

Their sins may have wounded Moses, but they really grieved God. The sins we commit against people are always sins against God *first*. When people betray you, they are wounding the heart of *your* God. Your first focus should always be *upward* in agony for the grieving heart of God, not *inward* to your own grieving heart.

Because this betrayal is a slap in God's face, it puts the betrayers in mortal danger. God will not be mocked. We will always reap what we sow. The LORD says of them in verse seven, "They have become corrupt." He adds in verse nine, "They are a stiff-necked people." He concludes in verse ten, "Now leave me alone so that my anger my burn against them and I may destroy them." If we could grasp what it means for sinners to fall into the hands of an angry God, we would be petrified for them. Instead of fixating on his own pain, Jesus focused on the terrible wrath that would fall on those who crucified him. So he cried out for those who had betrayed him, "Father, forgive *them*..."

When someone betrays you, it's their problem and not yours. Joseph Conrad wrote in his novel *Lord Jim*, "They talk about a man betraying his country, his friends, his sweetheart. But, first of all, a man must betray his own conscience." Swiss Psychiatrist Henri Nouwen wrote, "Hurting

people hurt people.” Betrayal is always bigger than our personal hurt. That’s why we need to look *upward* with concern for the God who has been betrayed, and *outward* in concern for the danger of the betrayer, rather than *inward* at the wounds of our betrayal.

## 2. Turn your bitterness into their betterness

After an angry God says that he will destroy the Israelites, he cuts a deal with Moses at the end of verse ten: “Then I will make you into a great nation.” God is offering Moses the same deal he cut with Abraham 500 years before. He’ll wipe the slate clean, and then start over with Moses as the father of a new nation. If Moses was consumed with bitterness at their betrayal, he would have jumped at this offer. How many times have some of us wished that God would kill the people who have broken our hearts (or at least hit them with a plague or two)?

As you will see in a moment, God never intended to destroy those idolaters. He was pushing Moses to be as gracious and faithful as he was. We can learn so much from that wounded pastor’s response in verse eleven: “But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God...” The Hebrew word for favor is literally *grace*. The word *sought* means to pursue something with all the passion you possess. Moses is pulling out all the stops, wrestling with his LORD to be a God of grace.

Immediately, I see another key to getting over the wounds of betrayal: we have to fight through the pain for the gain of getting God’s heart. Remember, this is not about Moses. It is first and foremost about **God’s glory**. Moses argues that God would deny his very character if he destroyed the nation of Israel. He argues in verse 12, “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with an evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains...’” Moses can’t stand the thought that the pagan nations would dismiss his God as evil or rash. He goes on in verse thirteen, “Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to whom you swore by your own self...” He cannot stand the fact that his God would be laughed at as a liar or covenant breaker.

He pleads for the very people who betrayed him because it’s also about **the sinner’s salvation**. He cries out in verse 12, “Turn away your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.” In Moses’ pleading with God on Mt. Sinai we hear an echo from Mt. Calvary: “Father, forgive them...” Billy Graham once observed, “When we sin against God or others, we want mercy. When others sin against us we want justice.” It’s hard to plead for mercy for those who wound us.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.” (Matthew 5:7). Moses could have curled up in a ball of bitterness. That’s what some of us have done. But Moses plowed through his own bitterness, by pleading for mercy for those who betrayed God and him. Because he was merciful, God showed mercy to him and his idolatrous

people. Verse fourteen says, "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." Moses turned his bitterness into their betterness.

I remember when I couldn't shake the bitterness I felt toward some folks who had betrayed me. I walked in the mountains of a Caribbean island, weeping in anguish. Deep inside, I rebelled at forgiving them. The next day, while browsing through an island bookstore, I ran across R.T. Kendall's book, *Total Forgiveness*. He said, "You have not truly forgiven those who hurt you until you actively pray for God to bless them." That's what Moses did. Jesus says in Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." John Calvin writes, "This kind of mercy is exceedingly difficult. The 4<sup>th</sup> Century Church Father John Chrysostom writes, "It is the very highest summit of self-control. It is to become like Jesus himself."

When I prayed for God to bless my betrayers, my bitterness began to lift. I would like to tell that it never came back. But, when I least expect it, it still does. *Total forgiveness* is a long-term commitment. You need to practice it every day of your life until you die. It is never easy. But it takes away your bitterness, blesses God, and makes others better.

### **3. Turn your painful feelings into productive actions.**

The first thing Moses did was to get his focus and feelings right. Then he takes action to set things right. If you wait until the hurt goes away, you will never be any help to anyone else. I have discovered that to get my feelings right, I have to *do* right even when I don't feel right.

#### **1) Face it head on, and soon.**

Verse fifteen says, "Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands..." Let's unpack that little verse. First, Moses *turned*—away from the God with whom he had been wrestling. When we are wounded we need to go to God first. Like Moses, we may even have to wrestle with him before we can get our head and heart in the right place. But there comes a time when we have to get up and go back to the world where we have been betrayed.

Secondly, Moses *went down the mountain*. It wasn't easy to go *down*. On the mountain, he basked in God's holy glory. Down below, the people are engaged in unspeakable depravities. He's going to have to confront them head on, and that's never pleasant. He *will* be putting his life on the line. But, when brothers and sisters are in sin, we must go *down* into the muck and rescue them.

Thirdly, Moses went with *the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands*. The Bible hadn't been written yet. These two tablets of the Law was the only written Word that Moses had at his disposal. But he took it,

because that was all he had to stand on. We have so much more than Moses possessed: a whole Bible that give us all the authority we need.

Is there a broken relationship in your life? Ephesians 4:26&27 says, "Don't let the sun go down on your wrath, lest you give the devil a foothold." Time doesn't heal all wounds. It only makes them fester. If we don't act *immediately*, we give the devil a foothold. The only thing that heals wounds is medicine: cutting out of the cancer of sin, the sting of confession and acid taste of repentance, followed by the soothing salve of forgiveness. We have to face it head on—the sooner the better.

## **2) Act with reason, not rashness.**

I'm glad that Moses took a few hours to get down that mountain. He had time to think things through. James 1:19&20 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteousness that God desires." But, in the silence of the walk, Moses formulated a redemptive strategy.

Step one: he threw down the tablets, shattering them. Verse 19 says, "His anger burned..." It's not always wrong to show our anger. There are too many wimpy saints trying to appease a politically-correct culture. Sometimes we need to get viscerally and visibly angry in the face of evil. I believe that Moses is giving an object lesson. When he shatters the tablets, he is saying that they have broken the Law as well as God's heart. In short, he is confronting them with their sin.

Step two: he destroys the bull. As we learned in our last episode of Exodus, we have to topple the idols in our lives. Nothing comes before God. Verse 20 says that he grounds it up into powder, scatters it on the water, and makes them drink it. This is bitter medicine. An internist told me that this would make people sick to their stomach, with retching to follow. We have to confront the awfulness of our sins, even though it makes us want to throw up.

Step three: He confronts Aaron in verse 21: "What did these people do that you led them into such great sin?" Moses' confrontation is so severe that Aaron shrinks back in terror. We might all want to pray that God would give us leaders who are not afraid to put the fear of God in people. Church discipline is a relic of a bygone past, and God's people have become impotent because of it. Finally, Moses called the people to strap on swords and go throughout the camp slaying those who refused to turn from this idolatry and the orgy that it produced. A terrible slaughter followed. It offends our postmodern sensibilities. But Moses knew that he had to tear this idolatry out by its roots or it would spring up again to corrupt his people. By the end of the day, this great leader had restored order to the people of God. And so we are called to bring God's order to the disorder in our relationships. It's not easy to confront sin, and it has to be done with care and humility. But it must be done.

### 3) Point to the Cross.

Verse 30 says, “The next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’” When he carries the sins of his people back up that mountain, we see Jesus carrying our sins on his back up another hill outside Jerusalem. On the Cross Jesus made atonement for our sins. Notice Moses said, “*Perhaps* I can make atonement...” It is a wishful hope. The truth is: he can’t make atonement. But on Mt. Sinai, God gives him a plan that is recorded in the rest of Exodus: a plan for a tabernacle, priests, sacrifices, washings, cleansings, dietary laws, and feast days. It’s an exhausting plan, confusing to some of us. But in it, God is carving out a graphic picture of his Only Begotten Son who will come to carry their sins, shed his blood on the Cross, and atone for their sins. Only at the Cross is grace found, and *total* forgiveness possible. That’s why we must always go there together if we are to find peace.

### 4) Intercede for the best for your betrayers.

In verse 32 Moses pleads, “But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” Catch your breath here. Moses is literally saying, “If you don’t forgive them, then take my name out of the Book of Life.” Jesus said, “If you don’t forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive yours sins.” (Matthew 6:15) Moses is saying the reverse to God: “If you don’t forgive men their sins, then don’t forgive my sins.” He is holding God to the same standard that God holds us to. This Moses is very clever. More than that, he has a great heart of mercy and grace. Indeed, it is not *total* forgiveness until you would do anything (even get yourself written out of the Book of Life) to see mercy and blessings poured out on those who have hurt you. Jesus prayed for his betrayers, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Moses didn’t have to go to hell to get his people forgiven, but Jesus did. Yet isn’t it great that Moses had the heart of Jesus? Do you?

### 5. Leave the outcome in God’s Hands.

Moses didn’t get everything he prayed for. God answered him in verse 34, “However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sins.” And the Lord struck them with a plague according to his schedule and will. Total forgiveness is to say what Jesus said on the Cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” He said it the night before in Gethsemane: “Nevertheless, your will be done.” It is to trust God to deal perfectly with my wounds and the ones who wounded me. Then you can say with Jesus, “It is finished!” You can walk away from the bitterness of betrayal knowing that your Savior will handle it. And, because the past is finished, you can focus on the journey ahead.