

The Book of Life and the Foundation of Evangelism (Exodus 32:21-35)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review and Background

- a. Moses has descended from Mount Sinai with the two tablets on which were engraved the 10 Commandments, after being with the Lord for 40 days. Aaron and the people had constructed a golden calf and referred to it as the god who delivered them from Egypt.
- b. When Moses sees the calf and the revelry, he is furious. He smashes the two tablets on the foot of the mountain. Then he burns the golden calf in a fire, smashes it to dust, scatters the dust into a stream coming down from the mountain, and compels the people to drink it.

II. Aaron Makes Excuses and Shades the Truth

- a. Read **Exodus 32:21-24**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. Moses confronts Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you brought so great a sin upon them?"
 - ii. Aaron does not take responsibility, but instead blames the people.
 1. Aaron responds to Moses, "You know how impulsive this people is."
 2. Aaron correctly recounts how the people insisted that Aaron make "gods" to lead them, after Moses tarried so long from returning.
 3. Aaron asked them for gold (correct recounting).
 4. Then Aaron *deviates* from telling the truth.
 - a. Aaron had used an engraving tool to make the calf.
 - b. However, he says that he just cast the golden ornaments of the people into the fire, "*and this calf came out!*"
- c. **Question:** *Why did Aaron lie* and not take responsibility for making the golden calf?

- i. He didn't want to incur the wrath of his brother, Moses. This suggests that Aaron was a conflict avoider, a coward.
 - ii. He did not want to take responsibility, but instead put the focus of the blame on the others.
 - iii. He tried to make himself look better than he actually was. He was more concerned with pleasing (and fearing) people than with pleasing and fearing God.
 - 1. He demonstrated this *first* by going along with the people in making the golden calf (although he knew this was wrong).
 - 2. Aaron demonstrated this weakness in his character a *second* time when he lied to Moses about making the golden calf, because he was afraid to face his brother's wrath.
 - iv. While Aaron mostly told the truth, he deceitfully shaded the story to make himself seem less guilty, left out some of the most important details, and added a lie.
- d. **Question:** Are there any *lessons for us* in the story we just read?
- i. There are many (bad) examples in the Scriptures of people who were afraid to take responsibility for their sin, and therefore *made excuses*.
 - 1. Adam hid and then blamed the woman instead of taking full responsibility for his sin, in **Genesis 3**.
 - 2. King Saul deflected blame on the people he was supposed to be leading, when Samuel confronted him about sparing the Amalekite cattle and sheep he was supposed to destroy.
 - a. Saul defended himself by saying, the sake of the people, I listened to their voice", and "I feared the people and heeded their voice". (**1 Samuel 15:20-24**)
 - 3. David tried to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba, in **2 Samuel 11**.
 - ii. In contrast, we also have some *heroic examples* of those who strove to be righteous by admitting their sins and taking full responsibility (without trying to justify themselves, look good, or deflect blame to others).
 - 1. Job insisted that if he sinned unaware and later discovered it, he did not cover up his sin, but rather confessed it before the multitude. (**Job 31:34**)

2. After being confronted by Nathan the prophet, David took full responsibility for his sin with Bathsheba and its consequences.
 - a. David pleaded in **Psalm 51** (designated **Psalm 50** in the LXX) "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy... I know my lawlessness and my sin is always before me... A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit. A broken and humble heart God will not despise..."
 3. Recall that Jesus said: "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (**John 3:19-21**, NKJV)
- iii. Some spiritual lessons from life, to take personal responsibility:
1. Growing up Roman Catholic, I recall learning and saying the old *Penitential Prayer*, which began:
 - a. "I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters,
 - b. that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words,
 - c. in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
 - d. [continuing the prayer, typically while striking one's breast three times] *through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault...*"
 2. As a young intern training in the full-time ministry of a large urban church, one of the most painful lessons I recall being taught by the evangelist training me was *to never make excuses*. He trained us to *always take full responsibility* for our sins and mistakes!
 - a. One of the most crippling things you can do as a parent is failing to teach your children to take responsibility for their sins and mistakes.
 - b. Start by setting the example in your household of *taking full responsibility* for what you did wrong whenever you sin or make a mistake.

III. Judgment on the People for Their Sin

- a. Read **Exodus 32:25-29**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. Moses calls for those “on the Lord’s side”. Only the Levites respond and come.
 - ii. He tells them to strap on a sword, go through the camp from end to end, and randomly slay their fellow Israelites (including sons, relatives, friends and neighbors).
 - iii. It says that *about 3,000 men* were killed that day.
- c. **Question:** What do we learn about the people from this story? What about the *Levites*, and what do we learn about *the other eleven tribes*?
 - i. The Levites (Moses’ own tribe) were the only ones who responded when he said, “All who are on the Lord’s side come to me”.
 1. Keep in mind that there was no priesthood yet, and no tabernacle.
 2. All 12 tribes had seen:
 - a. the 10 Plagues;
 - b. the parting of the Red Sea;
 - c. the pillar of fire and cloud that led them; and
 - d. the miracles of the quail, the daily manna.
 - e. All 12 tribes had heard the voice of the Lord at Mount Sinai speaking the 10 Commandments.
 - f. Also, all 12 tribes had heard Moses’ rebuke and seen his wrath in demolishing the golden calf.
 3. What does that tell us about the hearts of the people from *the 11 tribes who declined to respond* when Moses said, “All who are on the Lord’s side come to me.”?
 - a. These were incredibly hard-hearted people, who were unrepentant even after the rebuke of Moses.
 - b. They did not learn the lesson of the gravity of their sin. They had rotten, arrogant, disobedient hearts.

- ii. The Levites not only responded to the initial call, but even obeyed Moses' gruesome instruction to kill their brethren!
 - 1. Obviously, God's teaching on nonresistance would be revealed by Jesus at a later time.
 - 2. However, this spirit of the Levites reminds me in some ways of what Jesus said in **Matthew 10** when he sent out the twelve apostles.
 - a. "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." (**Matthew 10:32-39**, NKJV)
 - b. Even now, in the kingdom of God, Jesus *brings division* and calls for those with him to obey him even to the point of dividing families and losing relationships for His sake.
 - c. The Levites were not only on God's side, but were willing to obey even the *most challenging* commands from the Lord.
- d. **Question:** Why such a gruesome penalty?
 - i. This mode of punishment would teach them a lesson *they would never forget*.
 - ii. The physical *deaths* that occurred during the Wilderness journey as a result of sin also serve to remind of the *spiritual death* we will see if we imitate their evil example and commit the same sins. Consider **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, where that point is made, just as:
 - 1. The 23,000 who died in one day due to sexual immorality; and

2. Those who tempted Christ who were “destroyed by serpents”; and
 3. Those who complained, who were “destroyed by the destroyer”.
- iii. God punished thousands of them with physical death to teach us Christians an unforgettable, extremely graphic lesson that even though we have been baptized and eaten the spiritual food and drink, and drank from the living waters from Christ, we will see spiritual death and will fall short of the Promised Land (heaven) if we fall into the same sins.

IV. Moses Seeks Atonement for Their Sin

- a. Read **Exodus 32:30-35**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. The next day after the slaughter of 3,000, Moses tells the people that he must approach the Lord to *seek atonement* for their great sin.
 - ii. Moses approaches God and asks for forgiveness for the people’s sin.
 - iii. Moses takes an extraordinary step in his prayer. He says that if God *will not forgive* their sins, may he (Moses) be “blotted out of the book you have written”.
 1. Moses figuratively ‘lays down on the tracks’ before the train of God’s wrath and tells Him to either stop the train or else *run over him* as well as all the other (guilty) people!
 2. Moses puts God’s love for him on the line, to save his people the Israelites.
 - iv. The Lord responds that He will only blot out the names of those who sin from His book. He further says that “in the day when I visit” He will strike the people for their sin.
- c. **Questions:** What do we learn *about Moses* here? And what do we learn *about God*?
 - i. The character of Moses.
 1. He is not just concerned about himself (and his immediate family).
 2. He cares deeply about his people, the nation of Israel, despite the fact that they have sinned grievously and repeatedly.

Despite the fact that he had just been extremely angry with them.

- a. From Clement, bishop of the church in Rome, writing c. 95 AD, commenting on the amazing love that Moses showed here toward his people:
 - i. "...understand, beloved, you understand well the Sacred Scriptures, and you have looked very earnestly into the oracles of God. Call then these things to your remembrance. When Moses went up into the mount, and stayed there, with fasting and humiliation, forty days and forty nights, the Lord said unto him, 'Moses, Moses, get down quickly from here; for your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have committed iniquity. They have speedily departed from the way in which I commanded them to walk, and have made to themselves molten images.'
 - ii. "And the Lord said him, 'I have spoken to thee once and again, saying, I have seen this people, and, behold, they are a stiff-necked people: let Me destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make you a great and wonderful nation, and one much more numerous than this.' (**Deuteronomy 9:13**) But Moses said, 'Far be it from You, Lord: pardon the sin of this people; or else blot me also out of the book of the living.' (**Exodus 32:32**)
 - iii. "O marvellous love! O insuperable perfection! The servant speaks freely to his Lord, and asks forgiveness for the people, or begs that he himself might perish along with them."
 - iv. (Source: Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, chapter 58; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 19)
3. Here I see in Moses the embodiment of the second greatest commandment, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (**Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39**).
4. The attitude of Moses toward his people here reminds me of the attitude of Paul toward his own people, the Jews. Paul wrote:

- a. "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved." (**Romans 10:1**, NKJV)
 - b. "I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For *I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh*, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises;" (**Romans 9:1-4**, NKJV)
- 5. Jesus obviously exemplified that attitude: one man who was willing to die to save the whole nation.
 - a. "And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.' Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that *Jesus would die for the nation*, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad." (**John 11:49-52**, NKJV)
 - b. "But He was wounded *for our transgressions*, He was bruised *for our iniquities*; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And *the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*." (**Isaiah 53:5-6**, NKJV)
- ii. The concern for saving others (for us: evangelism).
 - 1. I was recently presented with a challenge by a brother from another place, with a similar spiritual background, regarding what our group of Christians teaches regarding evangelism.
 - 2. His question to me and David was which of the two alternative views we teach here, regarding evangelism:
 - a. Personal evangelism is a requirement to be saved. (In other words, this is a requirement for salvation. If we are not evangelistic, we will not make it to heaven.); OR
 - b. Personal evangelism is not necessary for salvation, but is just the natural result of gratitude for what God has

done for us (i.e., we are saved solely by what God did for us, and therefore we don't need to actually DO anything to be saved).

3. *Background: many of us in our house church come from a church movement where there was TREMENDOUS focus on personal evangelism. We had been taught that each member of the church was personally responsible for implementing the Great Commission of **Matthew 28:18-20**. At times this also resulted in spiritually unhealthy pressures and practices. So even bringing up this subject of evangelism can tend to provoke something like 'spiritual PTSD' (or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in some of us!*
 - a. I think we have a group in our house church that has strong convictions about the importance of seeking and saving the lost. However, many in our house church heard *so much* preaching about evangelism in the past that in reaction, we have tended to *avoid* teaching more on this subject.
4. My response to my friend's question/challenge: Neither of those two alternative views he presented accurately reflects what we believe the New Testament teaches regarding evangelism.
 - a. We are commanded to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. More than that, Jesus said He gave us a new command, that we love each other as He loved us (laying down His life for others).
 - b. If we do not love others as we love ourselves, we will not remain in the vine. We will be cut off and cast into the fire.
 - c. **Imagine the Following Scenario:**
 - i. You are sitting in your living room enjoying an iced tea, look out the window, and you see that your neighbor's house is on fire. The neighbor is trapped by the fire and is crying out for help from a second-story window.
 - ii. You are trained at firefighting and rescue, and you have a long extension ladder and other firefighting equipment nearby in your garage.

- iii. Rather than stop what you are doing and rescuing your neighbor, you choose instead to *remain in your living room* and keep sipping your iced tea.
 - 1. To state the obvious: You are simply too lazy and/or selfish to save your neighbor's life.
- iv. **Questions:**
 - 1. Do you really "love your neighbor as yourself"?
- d. If you see your neighbor without food or clothing and say "be warm and well fed" but do nothing, do you love your neighbor? (This is the rhetorical question posed in **James 2:8-26**.)
 - i. That discussion begins with a call to fulfill the "royal law": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (**James 2:8**)
 - ii. If we see someone in need and have the ability to help but *do nothing*, we simply *do not love* that person.
 - iii. Similarly, John wrote:
 - 1. "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, *let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*" (**1 John 3:16-18**, NKJV)
 - iv. Similarly, we don't need a specific requirement in the New Testament to compel us to share our faith with unbelievers. *If we truly love others* and know they are lost and headed for destruction, we will do everything we possibly can to help them to salvation.
 - 1. We will overcome our laziness and fear of people, if we are motivated by love.

2. We will not be either complacent (if God has used us to lead a few people to faith) or insecure, based on how much we have done.
 3. If we can say with a clear conscience (not just deceiving ourselves) that we have indeed *loved others as much we love ourselves*, we have fulfilled the royal law. It will manifest itself in how we use our time, talents and money to spread the gospel.
 4. If you are convicted about that, now is a great time to repent!
- v. If we simply call others to truly love others as they love themselves and obey the second greatest commandment, they will strive to get the job done.
1. Not only will we reach out to unbelievers with the gospel, we also will step up and address sin in the lives of other disciples when we see it, and not just look the other way.
 2. Also, we should never resort to twisting the Scriptures nor manipulating Christians through artificial means to share their faith with others.
 3. **Question:** Can you think of a single passage in the New Testament where Christians are called to repent of their *lack of evangelism*?
 - a. I can't. But there are many places where Christians are called to love others and challenged (and rebuked) for their lack of love.
 - b. It seems to me that we should follow what we see in Scripture, rather than attempting to invent a 'better way' to motivate our

brothers and sisters to spread the gospel.

4. The primary reason most Christians do little or no personal evangelism is that *they really do not love their neighbors as they love themselves*. It is that simple (in my opinion).
- vi. I noticed an odd, related problem in churches where people were taught, "If you aren't making disciples, you aren't a true disciple (therefore the message was that you aren't saved and won't make it to heaven)". Christians would wonder: "Have I done *enough* disciple-making *to be saved*? How much is *enough*?"
 1. What if I helped make *just one* disciple? (for example, if I met and was the first person to bring an unbeliever to faith; or studied the Scriptures with that person and baptized him or her)
 2. But what if that one person I helped to convert ultimately *fell away* from the faith years later?
 3. What if I helped one person become a Christian, *but that was a long time ago* (say 10 years ago)?
 4. What if I was on a foreign mission team and very evangelistic 20 years ago, but have done little or nothing recently to reach out to the lost?
 5. Bottom line: If it is necessary to be making disciples in order for one to be saved, how can you ever know if you have done enough?
 - a. In the process of struggling with these sorts of questions, some would end up constantly doubting if they had done enough to be saved.

- b. In reaction to this performance-oriented perspective, which resulted in some never feeling any security regarding their salvation, I saw some swing to the other extreme (which is *equally incorrect*) of evangelical Protestant type thinking. (Namely, you don't need to do *ANYTHING* to be saved beyond your initial conversion; it is all by grace, defined as unmerited favor, and you have unconditional eternal security and can't lose your salvation no matter what you do or don't do).
- 6. As Christians, if we can honestly and objectively say that we *have loved God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength*; and that we have *loved our neighbors as ourselves* (and demonstrated that by our lives, including helping the poor and by sharing our faith with the lost), can't we be confident that Jesus will be pleased with us? Won't He say to us on that Day, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Lord."?
- vii. One more point regarding evangelism and loving others.
 - 1. Many people who had bad or mixed motives have been used by God to reach out to others and to bring people to Christ.
 - 2. Plenty of people who have been effective at making disciples will be lost on the Last Day. Evangelistic effectiveness is no guarantee of salvation. Jesus said in **Matthew 23** that even the hypocritical Pharisees "went over land and sea" to win converts, yet were themselves "sons of hell".

3. The point Paul is making in **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** is that regardless of what kind of highly regarded religious activity I am involved in (he mentions speaking in tongues/languages, having faith to work miracles, giving prophecies, giving wealth to the poor, and even suffering a martyr's death), *if I am not doing it out of love, I AM nothing and I GAIN nothing!*
 - a. Clearly, the same is true for evangelism. If we convert hundreds of people, but it is not done out of love, they may benefit, but *we certainly will not!*
 4. If you don't currently feel that you have the skills and training to effectively be a 'spiritual firefighter' and rescue others from the flames, *seek help from others who do have the skills!*
- iii. We also learn some things *about God* from this account.
1. He only wants to punish the guilty (He does not want to blot out Moses' name from His book).
 - a. This is similar to what we saw in **Genesis 18:22-32**, where the Lord explains to Abraham that He would not destroy Sodom for the sake of *even ten* righteous people.
 - b. In the current story, we learn that the Lord does not condemn *even one* righteous person with the wicked.
 2. In this passage, we learn the Lord *has a book*, with names written in it.
 - a. This is the first place where we find mention of this book, elsewhere called "the Book of Life". However, it is mentioned throughout the Scriptures.
 - b. The names written in this book *can be blotted out!*
 - i. This alone demolishes the false doctrine of "once saved / always saved" (unconditional eternal security).

- d. The Book of Life (which has the *names of people* in it).
 - i. It is wonderful to think that *there is a Book of Life*, and *our own names* are written in it!
 - 1. Let us make sure that we live in such a way that our names are *never blotted out* from that book.
 - ii. Read **Psalm 69:21-28** (designated **Psalm 68:21-29** from LXX), a prophecy about the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus.
 - 1. It says regarding the wicked enemies responsible for torturing the righteous, "Let them be *blotted out from the book of the living*, and not written with the righteous".
 - a. As an aside, obviously the writer did not believe that "no one is righteous" (which many Protestants, especially Calvinists, teach). If that was the case, the book would be only empty pages, *with no names written in it!*
 - iii. Read **Daniel 12:1**.
 - 1. At the end, those whose names are found written in the Book of Life will be delivered.
 - iv. Read **Luke 10:20**.
 - 1. Jesus told the apostles, "...do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather *rejoice because your names are written in heaven.*" (**Luke 10:20**, NKJV)
 - 2. **Question:** *Where* in heaven are their names written? On the walls?
 - a. We know that their names (as well as ours) are written *in the Book of Life* in heaven, which is discussed in the **Book of Revelation**.
 - b. Actually, regarding the apostles (but not the rest of us Christians), their names also are written in *one other place* in heaven.
 - i. "Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and *on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*" (**Revelation 21:14**, NKJV)

v. Read **Philippians 4:3**.

1. "And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, *whose names are in the Book of Life*." (**Philippians 4:3**, NKJV)

vi. From the **Book of Revelation**:

1. "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and *I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life*; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." (**Revelation 3:4–5**, NKJV)
2. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And *anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire*." (**Revelation 20:11–15**, NKJV)

vii. We see from the Scriptures that those found written in this Book of Life will be among the righteous who are delivered. On the other hand, those whose names are not found in this book on the Last Day will be cast into the lake of fire.

1. May we all strive to be among those who overcome, whose names Jesus will never blot out of that book!
2. This is the same book that Moses first introduced to us, in **Exodus 32**.