

The Lord, Merciful & Gracious

Exodus 34:1-10

Israel smashed the covenant, worshiping the work of their hands instead of the Lord who made them (Ps. 106:20; cf. Ex. 19:5-6). God's kindness is already on display, but now He declares His name, full of covenant love and justice.

Overview of the Text

The Lord tells Moses to cut two new tablets, which He will inscribe like the last set (v1). The Ten Commandments are good news to Israel: "I am the Lord your God who redeemed you out of bondage in Egypt" (Ex. 20:1). Moses will go up in the morning, and unlike last time, no one else will go near the mountain (v2-3; cf. Ex. 24:1). He's not just a leader of Israel, but the sole mediator. When he goes up and takes the tablets, the Lord descends in the cloud and proclaims His name twice: "Yahweh, Yahweh God" (v6). This name emphasizes His self-existence, faithfulness, and power, which is then described: merciful and gracious, longsuffering, abounding in goodness and truth, showing mercy for thousands (of generations). His forgiveness includes iniquity, transgression and sin, but this doesn't mean He winks at the guilty (vv6-7). He visits the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation (v7). Moses bows his head, worships, and asks the Lord to go among them even though they are stiff-necked, and to pardon and claim them for His inheritance (vv8-9). Yahweh will do more than Moses asks or thinks, and everyone will know it (v10).

By No Means Clearing the Guilty

If we've been reading Exodus attentively, it seems God often clears the guilty. He forgives Israel over and over, but this is not clearing the guilty—it's forgiving them. He is doing it right now as they mourn over their sin (33:4-5). Guilt and shame ought to lead to conviction, confession and then to repentance. But this is not everyone's response, and there will be a reckoning (Rom. 2:6). The army of Egypt tried to wipe Israel out and died according to strict justice. The idolaters who rejected Yahweh without sorrow, regret, and repentance fell under judgment. God abounds with mercy to those who want it. The prophet Joel quotes this verse, pleading with people not to fake it: "'Now, therefore,' says the Lord, 'Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness" (2:12-13). So all who want to turn from their sin and receive mercy from God, do in fact receive mercy. But not everyone does, and a judge who looks the other way isn't just. Like water, sin flows downstream to subsequent generations. This does not mean that a son is punished for his father's sin: "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ez. 18:20). It means subsequent generations imitate their fathers, especially second commandment violations. Israel has broken the second commandment, which is quoted in verse seven: "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (20:5). God allows this for a few generations and then mercifully interrupts the cycle. This should have father (and mother) repenting and taking responsibility for his sins to his children, leading in the way of grace. We are in desperate need of mercy.

NOTES

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Yahweh, Yahweh

Last chapter Moses wanted to know that God was with him, and so he heard His name in a shorter form and saw His glory (33:16-23). This fuller version of God name paints His character on the side of a hundred-story building. God is infinite and therefore always beyond finite description, but He fills our view. He repeats His name to assure Moses He is who He is—the same yesterday (at the burning bush 3:14-15), today, and forever—and to show him how to call on Him. God is the answer for the despairingly downcast.

- I. Merciful & Gracious – Mercy is God’s demerited favor, and grace is His unmerited favor. Before we have ever thought of God, much less thanked Him, He has already heaped His kindness upon us.
- II. Slow to Anger – The Lord is not on a hair trigger. He lets Israel ignore Him and His commandments, build the calf, and dance around it. It took 400 years before the iniquity of the Amorites was complete. God hears everything first hand, knows what will happen beforehand, and still gives sinners time to repent. Every day is another blue or beautiful gray sky to forsake sin and rest in grace.
- III. Abounding in Goodness & Truth – Not only is God not out to get you, He is out to love, save, deliver, transform, bless and honor you. His goodness and kindness cannot be contained but flow out like water from an artesian well, like a waterfall that never lets up, turning everything it touches to green. He gives more than we can receive, and it’s not blind or random. He abounds in truth, so all of His gifts are intentional, calibrated, measured, and delivered in His perfect wisdom.
- IV. Keeping Mercy for Thousands – God’s mercy doesn’t have a shelf life. The idea of inevitable decline is recently popular and totally unbiblical. Jesus didn’t die so that the world would be condemned, but so that it would be saved. This is why He defeated death. God loves you, your descendants, and those who are blessed by your love and obedience. He visits iniquity up to four generations but shows mercy *to thousands*.
- V. Forgiving Iniquity, Transgression, & Sin – If any child of God is still overcome with grief and despair, God applies His mercy to all of your wrongdoing—iniquity, transgression, and sin. Forgiveness is transactional, asked for by one party and granted by another. Accusers heap guilt and shame with no end in sight. But God forgives sin and completely cleanses us. Those who think God can’t forgive them do not have a high view of their sin, but a low view of God’s mercy. This is why Jesus died.

Above & Beyond

Moses just asked see God’s glory, and it worked (33:18-23). Now he wants God to do for Israel what only He can do: pardon their iniquity and keep them as His inheritance (v9; cf. 19:5-6). The Lord will forgive, but He also will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, all by way of this new covenant (v10). This is what He meant by abounding in goodness and truth. In the true meaning of the word, it’s going to be awesome. This is life in God’s covenant.

Exodus Sermon Series

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