

The God Who Is Near (Part 1 of 7)

New Tablets and a New Covenant

Exodus 34:1-10

Mark Vroegop

"The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you (Exodus 34:1–28, ESV)

For the last four weeks, we have been served very well as a church by a team of people who produced LIVE|13 for us. We have spent the month of August talking about the subject of anger, and I really want to encourage you to keep growing in your ability to deal with this very relevant issue. Our aim in this series was for you to get deep, to get connected, and to get trained. We wanted you to really deal with anger. And we wanted you to get connected with other people in a small group. Some of you who just started a group need to seriously consider continuing.

But we also wanted you to get trained. As you saw, God has given us a gift in Pastor Andrew, and I want to be sure you are using the opportunity to grow in your skills in using God's Word through counseling. I promise that you will be personally challenged as you learn how to help other people grow, and you will be better equipped to apply to the Word to the lives of people near you.

So let's keep living after LIVE. Let's keep dealing with anger. Let's keep getting into each other's lives. And use the resources that are available to you.

Wrapping Up Exodus

I really hope there are some of you who came to LIVE and decided to stick around. Today we are returning to a series on the book of Exodus, and we are entering our final section called, "The God Who is Near." For the next seven weeks we are going to watch this book come to a close, and the signature moment is when God physically inhabits the Tabernacle. Everything about this book has been driving toward this moment.

We have learned that the book of Exodus is not about Moses; it is not about Egypt; and it is not even about Israel. The book is about God. It is about His love for His people, His deliverance of them from Egypt, His supremacy over the so-called gods of Egypt, and His covenantal relationship with the people of Israel.

Central to that covenant is the giving of the Law. The Ten Commandments are the summary of a way of living that reflects the character of God. And we paused our study of Exodus at a pretty ugly moment.

Chapter 32 records one of the greatest failures in Israel's history. After 40 days of Moses' absence while he is meeting with God on the mountain, the people of Israel succumb to idolatry. They pressured Aaron to make a golden calf for them, and they fell into false worship and immorality. They broke God's covenant. The rapid departure from God was as fast as it was tragic. And there were enormous consequences. People died. God was angry. And the journey to the Promised Land was in jeopardy.

In chapter 33, Moses intercedes for the people before God, begging God to not depart from His people. The summary of this conversation is found in Exodus 33:15-16.

"And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"" (Exodus 33:15-16, ESV)

It would be hard to overstate the importance of this moment. Everything is on the line here. If God doesn't go with His people, then it's over. But the ball is totally in God's court. He has delivered them. He likes them, but He is not like them. Israel has rebelled, and the question hanging in the air is "What is going to happen next?" What is God going to do?

A Second Chance

Our text tells us what God does: He gives them a second chance. New tablets are made; the covenant is renewed; God reiterates His love for His people. It is a stunning display of the grace of God to undeserving sinners. It is a powerful prelude to what will come in the New Testament – God extends love and kindness to people who are rebellious. And why?

Because this book and the story of history is not about Moses or Pharaoh or Egypt or Israel. The story of the Bible and history is about God – a God who gives second chances. God loves us even though we don't deserve His love.

This section in Exodus will end with God inhabiting the Tabernacle. This worship center will be set in the middle of the camp, and God's glory will envelope it. And the beauty of that picture is the simple fact that God's presence is completely undeserved. God's presence is powerful because He is not like us, yet He likes us.

Psalm 78 is a record of the faithlessness of Israel and the faithfulness of God. Here is an example of from the Psalmist:

"But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again." (Psalm 78:36–39, ESV)

God is merciful to give people a second chance.

A Renewed Covenant

Verses 1-28 record the reestablishment of the covenant between God and His people, and there are familiar themes in these verses. Let me highlight nine of them:

1. Tablets (v 1)

When Moses came down the mountain the first time, he was holding a set of tablets that summarized God's covenant with His people. When Moses saw the degradation of the people, he broke the original tablets at the base of the mountain (32:19). It was a symbolic act of the severance of God's relationship with His people because of their rebellion. However, God commands Moses to cut two new tablets of stone, and there is clearly an emphasis on how there is a history here.

"The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke." (Exodus 34:1, ESV)

2. Mountain (vv 2-4)

Moses is told to come up to Mt. Sinai where he will meet with God (v 2). He is given instruction to come alone, and distance is to be kept from the mountain (v 3). Exodus 19 records a similar instruction, and the point was simply to emphasize the difference between God and the people of Israel.

3. Presence (vv 5-9)

Moses goes up on the mountain and God comes down (v 5). God comes down in a cloud, and proclaims His name to Moses. This is the way God has been dealing with Israel and Moses from the beginning. The burning bush, the protective cloud between Pharaoh and Israel, the cloud on the mountain with the first tablets, and the cloud that descended on the tent of meeting outside of the camp all point to the personal presence of God.

Now in this moment God makes a very important statement about Himself in verses 6-7. It seems to be an unpacking of His name and His character. And Moses gives a powerful response in verses 8-9. I think these are the most important verses of the entire chapter so let's come back to them.

4. Nations (v 10)

As God talks to Moses about making this covenant with Israel, we once again see that God is sending a message to the nations about Himself. His dealing with Israel is a means to this end.

"And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you." (Exodus 34:10, ESV)

God's aim is to proclaim His name in all the earth. Moses and Israel and Pharaoh and this covenant are all part of that plan.

5. No Other Gods (vv 11-17)

An important part of this covenant is the command regarding God's exclusive claim upon His people. He will drive the nations out of the land, and Israel is not to fall into the trap of worshipping other gods. In the midst of a cultural worldview with many gods, Israel will be marked as a nation with the one, true God.

6. Exodus People (vv 18-20)

God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt marked them for the rest of their lives, and God reminds them about this and connects it to His ownership of them. They are to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread and remember that "all that open the womb are mine." They belong to God. He delivered them from bondage in Egypt.

7. Remembrance (vv 21-24)

Israel was to have regular reminders about God's supremacy in their lives. One day per week they were commanded to rest. They were specifically told "in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest" because it was during these busy seasons that they would be tempted to push through and work non-stop, making their work ultimate. What's more, they were to observe festivals

throughout the year. There is to be a rhythm to their life that served to remind them as to who they are.

8. Sacrifice (vv 25-26)

The giving of offerings and sacrifices were an important part of their worship relationship with God. God required that their sacrifices be in accordance with His instructions and that it not mimic the sacrifices of the pagan gods (i.e., boiling a young goat in its mother's milk).

9. Provision (vv 27-28)

The text ends with an affirmation of Moses as the mediator of this renewed covenant, but it also highlights another forty days and forty nights where Moses is sustained by the presence of God. The last forty days of Moses' absence led to a disaster, but God provides another opportunity – a second chance.

Now if you have been a part of our study of Exodus, you will recognize these themes. If you have not been a part of our study so far, let me tell you that every one of these concepts is incredibly familiar. What is remarkable here is the simple fact that there is nothing new. This restatement of the covenant is simply a second chance. Even though Israel has sinned grievously, God offers an opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness. He extends grace upon grace.

This is the point of chapter thirty-four! The book of Exodus is designed to be theological book set in a narrative context; it is communicating something about God. And we learn that God is a mercy-loving, grace-giving, covenant-renewing God. He is a God of second chances. Don't get me wrong – God is still not like us; but He is as deeply gracious as He is dangerously holy.

This is the reason why we gather together on the Lord's Day. It is to rehearse God's grace and His mercy. It is to remind one another, to teach our children, and to pass along the stories of God's mercy – to celebrate a God of second chances.

"One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made... The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down." (Psalm 145:4-9, 14 ESV).

This grace and love of God has motivated song writers to write words like:

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love
Leading onward, leading homeward to Thy glorious rest above!*

(O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus – S. Trevor Francis, 1834-1925)

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

*Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song.*

(The Love of God – Fredrick Lehman, 1868-1953)

This is the beauty of God's love. And it is to be a mark of the church that we are a people who have all been given a second chance. We are people who have been graced by God despite our sinfulness and our rebellious ways. This was Paul's vision for the church:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, ESV)

We are no different than the people of Israel. Their story is our story! When we read Exodus we see ourselves. But, more importantly, when we read Exodus we see the mercy and grace of God. We see a God willing to give sinful people a second chance.

But why?

No Other God

The answer to why God would treat people this way is found in verses 6-8, a section that we skipped over so we could come back to it now. These verses contain the self-description of God, and they help explain why God would treat His people this way.

Why does God give His people a second chance? Because that is who He is. God is not acting out of character; He is acting *because of* His character. In other words, the display of grace is meant to say something about Him!

So what does God say about Himself? Notice that verse six begins with a repetition of the name Yahweh which is the name with which God identified Himself at the burning bush. It is repeated either for emphasis or as a means of affection (i.e., "I am your dear Yahweh).¹

What follows is a listing of attributes that characterize God, and these would be very important in this moment. The attributes or character of God is the sole basis upon which Israel would be delivered from their rebellion. Their hope did not depend on their performance in the future but on the promise of God's character. Look at what is here:

- **Merciful** – He is compassionate and genuinely cares about His people
- **Gracious** – He does things for people that they do not deserve and beyond what would be expected
- **Slow to Anger** – He is patient with His people's waywardness and failures
- **Abounding in steadfast love** – God is great in His covenant love and is loyal to His people despite their lack of loyalty to Him
- **Abounding in faithfulness** – He is equally full of truth such that He can be trusted unequivocally and eternally
- **Keeping steadfast love for thousands** – God will continue His love indefinitely
- **Forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin** – God eagerly forgives all kinds of sin, and this flows from the very essence of His character
- **Visiting iniquity** – God's grace balanced with justice; He forgives yet does not let the guilty get away without penalty.

Let me say a word or two about what this text actually means because some have taken it to mean that God punished the children and their children for the sins of their ancestors. This has led some to believe in generational curses – the idea that God judges or curses successive generations for the sins of previous generations. I've talked with people who were convinced that their family was "cursed" by God because of the sins of family members.

Rather, this text is describing God's just punishment of sin in each new generation if that sin continues to be repeated.² The message here is that God is going to consistently deal with sin in each generation. If your forefathers were punished for their sin, you will be as well if you follow their example.

It is true that family trees can have similar patterns of sinful behavior. You may be able to look back and see patterns of infidelity, substance abuse, same-sex attraction, violent behavior, or suicide in your family's history. But these issues are not a sign of the punishment of God indicating that there is no hope. These historical patterns are a part of the brokenness of the world. You are not hopelessly cursed by God because of the sins of others.

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006).

² *Ibid.*

The promise here is 1) God will treat you justly for your own sins, and 2) He is a God of second chances. He is a God full of justice and full of mercy. And all of it is rooted in His character. Grace is based upon who God is.

That is why Moses makes the following statement in verse nine:

"And he said, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.'"
(Exodus 34:9, ESV)

God's presence among His people was based upon God. They were stiff-necked but He loved them still. They were sinful to the core, and He pardoned them. They were rebellious, but God took them for His inheritance. This is the way God acts. He is a God of second chances.

This applies to everyone. All of us have broken our relationship with God through our sinful actions and attitudes. And the Good News of the Bible is that God, through Christ, is able to make you a new person from the inside out. Jesus called this being "born again." It means that you realize that you are a sinner and that you need a Savior. It means that you know that you need God's mercy. It is asking God to forgive you and inviting Christ to become your Lord and Savior.

Don't let your past or your failures stand in your way! The enemy would love to hold you back, trying to convince you that you could never be forgiven, that you are not worthy. And the fact of the matter is that being born again doesn't depend on you; it depends on God.

God knows you better than you know yourself. He knows your failures better than you can possibly imagine, and yet He loves you. But He loves you not because you are worthy but because He is so wonderful.

So come to Him today. Come back to Him. Return to Him.

He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He is a God of second chances.

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