

The Lord Passes By

Exodus 34:1-9

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, we are in Exodus 34, in the middle of the story of the golden calf and its aftermath, which runs from Exodus 32 to 34. It's ironic, isn't it, right smack in the middle of a section on worship, we have a story about idolatry. Of course, there's no mistake in that, that's precisely the point that Moses is making. Our hearts are idol factories, and even as God is giving instructions on worship while he's on the mountain, the children of Israel are worshiping idols down in the valley. So this is a standing warning against our own fickle hearts.

We've already noted several themes that run throughout this section in Exodus 32-34. For instance, we said that this whole section highlights the person and the role and the importance of the mediator. Throughout this passage, Moses is front and center in his mediatorial work. The children of Israel begin this passage by discounting the importance of Moses and suggesting that perhaps someone else could play the role that he is playing. The irony being, of course, that as you read through the story that if it were not for Moses, the children of Israel would have been exterminated on the spot. The mediator's role is important in this passage, and in fact, in this very passage, his significance is highlighted. We saw this in the previous passage even as the people themselves had caught a sense of Moses' significance and as he was on the way out to the tent of meeting, they themselves would stand, they would rise in respect, and stand at their tents and worship. Secondly, we said this whole section highlights the doctrine of sin. We can stand back at a distance and say, "How in the world could the children of Israel have heard the first and second commandments, let alone all the Ten Commandments, from the mouth of God and had done what they did in the immediate context of its giving?" They were trembling at the voice of God speaking to them His commands, and the next thing they do is break His commands. And not just barely breaking, not just fudging them, but flagrantly breaking those commandments. Now, how in the world could they have done that? Well, one of our problems is, of course, when we look at our own hearts and see ourselves doing the same thing. This passage gives us a look at the deceitfulness of our own hearts, even as we consider the going astray of Israel.

Thirdly, we also said that this section highlights God's compassion and graciousness. Yes, Moses is the instrument that calls upon God to manifest His

compassion, to show His grace to Israel, but it is very clear that in doing that, Moses is himself simply reflecting the heart of his God. In fact, this passage makes that clear in a way that no other Old Testament passage does. When you see God's description of Himself in verse 6 and 7, there is no question as to the origination of God's compassion and grace. It is not in Moses' coaxing Him to be compassionate that God's graciousness and compassion resides. These reside in God's own heart and are shown so strongly and clearly throughout this section.

Furthermore, this passage highlights the objective ground of the security of God's people in their relationship with Him. If our security with God rests in our own deeds, in our own sincerity, in our own efforts, in our own consistency, in our own work of perseverance, then we're done for. That's one of the things that comes through very clearly here, but thank God that it does not rest in us. This passage highlights the fact that our security is based on something outside of ourselves. On the one hand, it's based on something in G God, and on the other hand, it's based on something in the work of His mediator. And because of that, our inconsistency does not have the last word. This passage is therefore talking to us about grace. It's showing us how God saves us and keeps us by grace.

Now, we come to an extraordinary passage in Exodus 34. We find an emphasis on God Himself, on God's grace, and on the renewal of the covenant. In the midst of it is a fundamental revelation of God's character. He says some things about Himself that you will see repeated throughout the rest of the Scripture as a short summary statement indicating the essence of the heart of God. You also find in this passage strong covenant-making language, language that reminds you of Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34 and Hebrews 9. With this in mind, let's turn to God's word and hear from Exodus 34:1-9:

Now the LORD said to Moses, "Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain." So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth; who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray,

let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and God, we do praise You for the truth of Your word, and especially in this passage, the way You reveal Yourself in Your incomparable grace and mercy. We ask that You would teach us from it, show us our sins, show us our Savior, show us the security and glory of Your grace, exalt Yourself in our eyes, enable us by faith to embrace Your truth and grow us in grace by it, we ask all these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

This is a rich passage and I want to point to three things as we look through the passage together. We see, first of all, God renewing the covenant in this passage. You'll see the instructions in preparation for that in verses 1-4. Then, we see God revealing Himself in verses 5-7, and finally, Moses responding to God's revelation and the renewing of the covenant with a stunning prayer.

I. God renews the covenant.

Here we see preparation for a renewal of the covenant, for a reinstatement of Israel in that favored relationship which God had charted out for them. And we see in this section all the marks of a covenant-making ceremony. There are direct parallels to the event at Sinai. Perhaps you recall in verses 1-4 how similar things had been commanded and done when the children of Israel first came to Mt. Sinai. This is nothing less than a reestablishment of that covenant that had been inaugurated at Mt. Sinai with God's own voice in Exodus 19-20. In that first establishment, there were stone tablets, and here stone tablets. There, a proclamation of the Lord's name, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," and then His command comes. Here, "I am the Lord your God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger....."

Again, we see the making of a covenant and the covenant making language, and then in verses 10 and following, there are the demands of the covenant remade, just as they were made in Exodus 20. Specifically notice the parallels and the contrasts between Exodus 20 and Exodus 34. The shattered tablets of Exodus 20 are now to be replaced. The original text written by the finger of God is to be rewritten. Moses is to be ready to meet God in the morning. Do you recall when Israel was told to be ready to meet God at Mt. Sinai? In the morning. Moses is to go up and the Lord is to come down, just as before. Aaron does not go with Moses, however, this time, which makes perfect sense in light of Aaron's role in the idolatrous rebellion against God. He is not to go up this time. And here the mountain is put off limits, just as in Exodus 19 and 20 when the people of God were told "not to crowd in and touch the mountain, lest I strike you down." Once

again, no one is to be seen on the mountain here in Exodus 34, not even the animals are to graze in front of the mountain. So we see all of these parallels between Exodus 19 and 20 and the covenant-making ceremony there, and the renewal in Exodus 34.

And you also see the terms of the covenant repeated here. For instance, notice how God describes His manifestation to Moses in verse 6, "The Lord passed by in front of him." Now, the language of *passing by*, you will recall from Genesis 15 when the smoking oven and the flaming torch passed through the slaughtered animals. That's language of a covenant making ceremony, and you see the same language in Jeremiah 34. Now you might say, "Well, those are a long way away. Is that really what's on Moses' mind?" Well, turn back to Exodus 33:19,22, in the immediate context of Exodus 34, and look at the language there. God says to Moses, in verse 19, "I Myself will make My goodness pass before you." And then again in verse 22, "And it shall come about while My glory is passing by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock." Moses is using that language there. It's covenant-making language. It's the language of God coming and again binding Himself in commitment to His people. So, we see again the context of a covenant being renewed in this passage.

There is something very interesting that happens in this passage, and that is, that though the covenant is being renewed, the Ten Commandments are not repeated. It is true, as I just mentioned, that from verse 10 down to about verse 33, God gives a series of commands to Israel. They are to respond to His gracious covenant making and covenant reinstating, by being obedient in specific areas. But the Ten Commandments are not repeated. The only reference to the Ten Commandments in this passage is the reference to God rewriting the words of the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets. So, they are there, they are in view, but unlike in Exodus 20 when they are announced from God's own lips and they are recorded by Moses, we don't have a parallel.

What is the significance of this? There is actually a great deal of significance in it, because in this we learn that the terms of the covenant are a reflection of God's own moral character, and we learn this in two ways. We learn this because He is the one who speaks the words of the Ten Commandments, here as elsewhere, and He does this because the writing of those ten words, the creation of those ten words, are the product of His own self-expression. They don't come from somewhere out there, they come from within His own heart. They are an expression of what He's like.

The moral quality of the ten words are an expression of who God is, and here in this passage, secondly, in the absence of their repetition, we have in its place this description of God's character in verse 6 and 7, thus once again showing that the moral demands of God are rooted not in some sort of abstract, ad hoc, positive declaration of His will, but they are rooted in His own character. Because God is this way, His people are to live this way. Because God is this way, He

makes laws that are in accordance with His own nature. So we see here the terms of the covenant reflecting God's own moral character, both in His writing them with His own finger, indicating that these come from Me, they don't come from somewhere else, they come from Me; and secondly, in their not being repeated in this passage and only the character of God being highlighted.

This, of course, reminds us that God tells us to be and do things that are rooted in who He is and what He does. God's commands to us about what we are to be and do are rooted in what He is and does. They are not arbitrary. They are not capricious. They are not random. They are not disorganized. They are not haphazard. They make sense. They're centered in who He is. Now, in verse 1, you'll see God's command to Moses beginning with a directive to cut two stones for the purpose of replacing the shattered ones. Of course, the stones are the visible symbols, they are the concrete representation of the covenant between God and His people. We've already seen in the book of Exodus, we'll see it again, and we'll also see it in the book of Deuteronomy, that very often The Covenant is called The Law, and The Law is called The Covenant, and The Covenant is called the Ten Words, and the Ten Words are called The Covenant. God identifies The Law closely with The Covenant itself, because The Law is the distinguishing characteristic of the Mosaic Covenant.

In verses 2-4, God repeats those instructions about how Moses is to approach Him, and it's emphasized, if you notice in verse 4, that Moses rose up and went up to Mt. Sinai, how? As the Lord had commanded him. Now again, that's not by accident. The reason they were having to go through this is because the children of Israel had not worshiped God as the Lord had commanded them, and so when Moses emphasizes, "I did it just like God told me to do it," that is not extraneous information. It is central to this passage, in fact, you will find that phrase repeated no fewer than 14 times in the five books of Moses and other prophetic passages in the Old Testament. It is a key theme. Moses' obedience is obviously appropriate in light of the peoples' recent disobedience.

So what do we learn from this? In contrast to the spontaneous slipshod worship of the golden calf, the covenant approach to God is careful, it's respectful, and it's in accordance with God's commands. God will be approached carefully, He will be approached according to His command, and fellowship with Him will entail moral conformity to Him. And that message comes through loud and clear as the stage is set, here in verses 1-4, for this renewal of relationship with God.

II. The Lord draws near and reestablishes the covenant.

In addition to the covenant being renewed, we see the character of God revealed. In verses 5-7, we are treated to an astonishing verbal divine self-revelation of the character of God. The Lord Himself draws near to Moses at the top of Sinai, He walks between the pieces as we already noted in verse 6, He

draws near, He passes by, reestablishing the covenant, and He does, He is revealing His essential character in a dramatic way. This passage gives us an essential revelation of the name, of the character, the moral nature, and the heart of God. The *Name of the Lord* is an expression of what He is and what He does. What does the revelation turn out to be? If you look at the end of verses 6 and 7, that encapsulated statement, the revelation ends up being God preaching about God. God telling His people what He is like. It is the self-proclamation of God. Isn't it interesting that even though language, anthropomorphic language which talks about God coming and standing and passing by, that none of that is described by Moses. He says it, but when the revelation of God comes, how does it come? In His word. Look at how this is emphasized in the passage, "The Lord passed by in front of Him." Now, if you had been there and you had been writing this, wouldn't you have wanted to give about a seven-chapter description of that? There's nothing there. What is the next word? And proclaims, the Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness and truth." In the language of Moses, He's standing next to me, but all Moses tells you is what He said.

You couldn't find a stronger endorsement of the centrality of the word in growth and grace than that. You couldn't find a stronger endorsement of the importance of preaching than you find in that. The content of this proclamation gives guidance to preachers and gives guidance to members that sitting in the pews. Preaching must be first and foremost about God. It is a revelation first and foremost about God.. It doesn't mean that we don't speak about anything else. It doesn't mean that we don't speak about the Christian life. It doesn't mean that we don't speak about the way of salvation. It doesn't mean that we don't speak about Christian ethics, but it does mean that we speak to everything that we speak to in light of God and the way we speak to it is in a thoroughly God centered way. Our thinking is grounded in a God centered agenda. Notice that when God manifests Himself on Sinai, the content of His revelation to Moses is all about Him. That's the answer that the children of Israel need to have. They need to know about God. Now, they may have thought that they needed to know a lot of other things. God says here, "What you really need to know about is Me. That's the most practical thing that you could ever learn, is Me." That's what you need to know. You need to know your God.

Notice also that the revelation of verses 6-7 focuses on God's mercy and grace. If you were look back at Exodus 20:5-6, where God describes His character in language very similar to Exodus 34:6-7, you would notice something quite interesting. In Exodus 20, the Lord says, "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, but showing loving kindness to those who keep My commandments." And you say, "Well, that sounds very similar to this." It is, but notice the emphasis there is on the covenant jealousy of God and the judgment of violators, whereas in Exodus 34 the emphasis is on God's grace. "I'm merciful, I'm compassionate, and I'm slow to anger. Yes, I visit iniquity to the

third and fourth generation,” but the focus is on God's mercy and grace and that is wholly appropriate for this context. The children of Israel are perfectly aware that they deserved to be blasted into oblivion, and in precisely this context God says, “You are now ready because of what you know about yourself, and because of what you know about your deserving judgment, now, you are ready to learn something else about Me. And that is that I am more gracious than you could ever possibly imagine.” It's absolutely impossible for the children of Israel, based upon God's words about Himself, based upon their display of faithlessness and loyalty in the whole experience of the golden calf, based upon God's unfolding disciplinary providences, to think that they have been chosen or redeemer or kept by anything other than God's grace.

The whole chapter is God speaking with a megaphone in their ear. “Nothing in your hands you bring. There's nothing in you that compelled Me. There's everything in you that could have repelled Me. The grace comes from Me. The salvation comes from Me.” The whole passage is a reminder of God's grace. The Lord draws near, and He reveals His character in a striking way. He manifests His grace here in that He deliberately chooses to be gracious. He's not compelled or obligated. His choice emanates from own graciousness. It's not reflexive. It's not a response to how the children of Israel have acted. It's not because they're so lovable or because they've been so obedient. It's not based upon circumstances of the golden calf, but it's in spite of the circumstances of the golden calf. God's grace comes from Him. I am compassionate and gracious, therefore I choose to be compassionate and gracious to you. That's what God is saying here.

III. Moses' response is the only proper response.

Finally, in verses 8 and 9, we see the response of Moses, and he worships and then he intercedes. We see the worship and interceding response of the mediator, and we learn that the only proper response to the sight of God's grace is prostration. We see here the boldness of the mediator's prayers for us and they take our breath away. In verse 8, grace makes Moses bow low. Grace always does that. People who can be glib about grace, have never tasted grace. They've never seen their own sins. When you see grace, you bow low, because you realize how utterly undeserved it is. Here's Moses on his face before God saying, “Lord, we don't deserve what You've just revealed.” And God is saying to him, “You're right Moses, and I'm showing it to you any way.”

And then Moses begins to pray, and he prays this bold prayer found in verse 9, and he deliberately emphasizes the merciful qualities of God in his prayer, and there are five things He does in this prayer.

First, Moses pleads God's character. He pleads for God to be merciful because God has just announced Himself to be merciful. Secondly, he prays back God's

revelation to Him. He asks God to do exactly what He said He does in verses 6 and 7, to pardon to forgive to be patient to be slow to anger to show compassion. So, Moses prays back God's own revelation to God. He's praying Scripture back to God. What a wonderful pattern for prayer, praying Scripture back to God. The Puritans didn't make that up. They'd read Exodus. It's just what Moses did. Thirdly, notice how the mediator identifies with the sin of his people. Moses doesn't say, "Lord, forgive them of their sin. Lord, forgive us of our sin." Now Moses hadn't been down in that valley with them while they went astray, but Moses understood that I'm their mediator, I am them, and their sin is mine. Friends, that is vital in order for you to understand the work of the great Mediator who says, "Your sins are mine, and I've paid for them."

Fourthly, Moses attaches His plea for God's presence to God's favor towards Himself. Notice his language, "If I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, go with us." Moses stakes God's expressions of delight in Him as the basis of God's answering His prayer to draw near His people. Notice again how the grounds of the security of God's people in the covenant don't depend upon things in them. They depend upon things in God and things about the mediator, but not about His people.

And finally, this is almost beyond comprehension what Moses asks next, but he boldly prays for God to take His people for His own possession. He asks God to take His people for His own peculiar treasure. His special inheritance that He values above all else. Notice his language, "Take us as Your own possession." Do you realize what is being prayed there? Picture this: a wife has been unfaithful. Her infidelity is made known to her husband. She goes back to her husband and she asks her husband to take her back and above it, to choose her as the thing most precious to him in the world, the thing that he values above all else, the apple of his eye, the light of his life, the joy of his heart. In the wake of her infidelity, she asks him to deign her to be the most important thing in the world to him. You get nervous just thinking about that kind of scene, don't you. And God answers Moses' prayer, "Yes, I will." Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we have no idea how powerful are the intercessions of our Mediator on our behalf. Only the Mediator could ask a prayer like that and get an answer like the one You gave. Jesus, what a friend for sinners You are. May we revel in the glory of it, and walk close to You, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

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