

## Exodus 33-34

### ***I. Introduction***

As we have been journeying through the wilderness with Moses and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus, we are at a quite shameful and tense moment. In their impatience and sinful desire to “see” God, the Israelites took their gold and resources that they had brought from Egypt to create a golden calf. They acknowledged it as their god and worshiped it, breaking not just one, or two, but three of the commandments that God had given them. So what’s going to happen to the Israelites? Will Moses actually be able to make an atonement for their horrific sin? How is he even going to do that?!

Do you guys want to hear the good news first or the bad news?

The **bad news** is that the Almighty and holy God is really and righteously angry with the sins of the Israelites. In earlier chapters, God referred to his people as “*my* people,” and the angel that will go before them as “*my* angel.” But here in the beginning of chapter 33, God tells Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and THE people...” (v.1). Then in verse 2, God says, “I will send AN angel before you...”. So when God removes these intimate pronouns from the Israelites, it accentuates the gap in their relationship, and the sober reality that they have grown apart.

I have these friends, who are married and call each other, “babe.” But sometimes, they’ll get into arguments and the husband will refer to his wife by her first name, and that would just trigger her. She would correct him by saying, “Irene? Who is that? You mean babe?!” Some of you may relate and know firsthand that when you grow a personal relationship with someone, you use personal names, nicknames, and/or pronouns, to identify their belonging to you. And when that is stripped away, it speaks volumes.

And just when you thought things were bad, it gets worse... In verse 3, God lays down the hammer by revealing that he will not be going with the Israelites: “...but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” He is not going with them because the Israelites are a stiff-necked people, also known as, sinful, disobedient, and a covenant breaking people. If God goes with them, there is a high probability that he will kill them because he is holy and will not leave sin unpunished.

But here is some *generally good news*: God embeds these weighty words within his blessings and promises. He is still bringing them “to the land of which [he] swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” because he said he would give it to their offspring (v. 1). God is still going to provide an angel for guidance, and he is still going to drive out their enemies so that they can enter “a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 3). God is saying that he will still bless his people, just without him. He is proposing a life without God. Doesn't this sound kind of good? Maybe we won't say it as explicitly as this, but aren't there times when we urgently ask God to heal or fix us or our family members because it'll just be better that way? Don't we ask God to help us get this job or help our kids get into this particular school because we want us and them to succeed? Aren't we tempted to just ask God for *all* the blessings (because tbh, we have a lot going on in our lives), but fail to look at the God who gives these blessings? Sisters, this life of seemingly wonderful blessings without having any relationship with God is actually awful... And the Israelites recognized it too. Because when they heard God's words, do you know how they responded? They repented by taking off their ornaments (gold jewelry). In the last chapter, they used their gold to make an idol, but now they were taking it off for God. They recognized *Who* was more important. Our biggest blessing in this life is knowing God himself.

When I was in seminary, my Old Testament professor, Dr. Johnny Gibson taught us that there is a structure of organic flow that courses through the bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and that is: GRACE – LAW – MORE GRACE. And this is the structure that we will unpack as we go through Exodus 33 and 34.

## **II. GRACE – Exodus 33:7-34:9**

We will see God's grace in three sections: (1) the Tent of Meeting, (2) Moses' intercession, and (3) Moses making new tablets.

**A. The Tent of Meeting (33:7-11):** Some of us will recognize this place called, The Tent of Meeting, especially considering Jane Evans' insightful teaching on the Tabernacle. But this Tent of Meeting in Exodus 33 is different from the one that God intended to be in the Tabernacle. This tent was outside of the

camp because the Israelites were still under God's divine judgment. While it still had the same purpose, as a place to meet God, it was a "temporary tabernacle." Remember, God intended the Tabernacle to be in the center of where the Israelites were. But because of their sin, Moses had to take the tent, carry it outside of the camp, which was quite far away, and set it up, just to meet with God.

Here is how God's grace is leaking out of this temporary meeting place:

1. When Moses entered this tent, "the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the tent" (v. 9). God made his glorious presence visible to his people. He came down to meet Moses. The Creator of this world, the Alpha and the Omega, condescended, or He humbly stooped down, to speak to Moses. He could have communicated in any other way, but he decided to come down to his people.
2. Moses spoke to God "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (v.11). Face to face is a figure of speech to show that Moses was in direct communication with God. The fact that this communication is characterized like a friend distinguishes that there is still hope in this broken relationship between God and the Israelites.
3. Even this limited form of contact between God and Moses was still an extraordinary privilege because Moses is a man just like us: sinful, broken, and easily tempted. But God made a way to speak to him and have a relationship with him despite the Israelites' failures.

Even though God is separated from his people because of sin, he has not given up to find a way to dwell with his people. This temporary arrangement displayed the physical restrictions and complexities of accessing God, but it was a glimpse of what is to come. And this glimpse is revealed in Jesus Christ. In the gospel of John, specifically chapter 1 verse 14, it says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The word "dwelt" in Greek (ἐσκήνωσεν) actually means to tabernacle. So literally, it means, the Word, Jesus, became flesh and "tabernacled" among us. God sent his one and only Son to restore our access back to God, and for us to have a personal relationship with God, so that he can dwell in the center of our hearts. As dingy as this temporary tent may have seemed, it poured out God's grace to his people, and in Christ, to us.

**B. Moses' Intercession (33:12-23):** Now we get to go inside of the tent to learn about the inside scoop of what's going on between God and Moses. In his intercession or pleading, Moses asks for 3 things:

- (1) for God's help in leading the people of Israel (v.12-14)
- (2) for God to go with Israel as a nation (v.15-17)
- (3) for God to show him his glory (18-23)

Now, Moses is not rambling or speaking in a manipulative manner. He is desperate for God's mercy and help. He builds the logic of his intercession on God's promises. God has told Moses, "I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight" (v. 12). Thus, on these words Moses pleads for God to show him his ways, so that he may know God. Moses understands that in order for him to lead well, he needs to know the very mind of God. He needs God to lead and guide him to his next steps.

Sisters, I encourage you, as you navigate hard situations, broken relationships, and the unknown, we need to pray bold prayers, like Moses. We need to repeat and build our prayers on God's promises. And we must not move or do anything, unless we know God and his ways. Now, sometimes God's ways may not be clear. Currently, my husband and I are navigating church planting, and we are in the thick of the unknown. But these circumstances are avenues for prayer and clinging close to God.

God responds to Moses by saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (v.14). Sounds quite reassuring. BUT! In the Hebrew, the "you" is in the singular, and not the plural. Thus, God was saying that he would go with *only* Moses, and not with Israel. We may have not picked this up in our English bibles, but Moses certainly did. That's why he says in verse 15, "If your presence will not go with us, do not bring us up from here" (in the ESV, the "us" is translated as "me," but in the Hebrew it is "us"). Moses knew his role as a mediator for Israel, took responsibility, and pleaded for the Lord to be their God. Israel needed God just as much as Moses did.

And God answers all of Moses' prayers because of his gracious love and because he is pleased with Moses. When God declares in verse 17, "You found favor in my sight, and I know you by name," this echoes Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:17, when God declares, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." Hearing this, Moses boldly asks to see God's glory, which is the full revelation of God. This is

actually not the first time where Moses saw God's glory. He had seen glimpses of God's glory in the burning bush and the pillar of cloud at the Tent of Meeting, but he wanted a fuller knowledge. And even to this request, God answers it by showing him a glimpse of his goodness. But Moses is limited in what he can see of God because he is human. Some things, such as the glory of God, are beyond our mortal capacities. But the gracious and merciful God protects Moses by God from God via the cleft of a rock. The favor in God answering all of Moses' intercessory prayers, and even revealing a portion of his glory, proves God's grace to his people.

**C. Moses making new tablets:** In the last chapter (32), when Moses found out about the golden calf, the first tablet, or law, from God was broken, literally and relationally. Now, God was calling Moses to cut two tablets for him to write on. This in itself displays God's grace to his people in that: he still wanted to give them the law. Then, Moses wakes up early in the morning to go to Mount Sinai to receive the law. God again descends in the cloud to meet Moses. No matter how high Moses climbed up to meet with God, even at the highest point of the mountain, God still had to stoop down to meet him.

This time, God not only comes down, but proclaims his name: "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" (v.7). This is the definition of who God is. We see it referred to and quoted all over Scripture, by King David, Joel, and Jonah; so it is a pretty important text of God.

As I was preparing for this passage, I got to ask a OT professor at school about this text, and so I told him I'm doing Exodus 33 and 34, and he immediately quotes this verse, and says, "Oh that's a sermon." God is explaining who he is by speaking it to Moses. In contrast to the Israelites wanting to see a god, hence making their golden calf, and Moses wanting to see God's glory, God decides to reveal himself by word. Romans 10:17 states, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Even when the disciple Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection, and Jesus came face to face with him, and let him touch his wounds, Jesus tells him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And so, from the OT, God is intentional on how he desires to reveal himself to his people and he's consistent, in that God sends his Son as the Word that became flesh. Jesus proclaimed who he is, and today our primary way to know God is by the preaching of God's Word.

The reality was that people of Israel certainly needed a merciful, or compassionate God, who provided undeserved favor. They needed a God who was patient and did not get angry quickly. A God

who was committed to their covenant and faithful to the very end. And a God who would lift or carry (which is the definition of *nasah*/forgive in Hebrew) their wickedness, rebellion, and sin. You know, when God says that he forgives these three things: wickedness, rebellion, and sin, it covers ALL kinds of sin. This God that the Israelites needed was *their* God. This is the God of the exodus who saved his people from Egypt for his glory. God was proclaiming in word what he already demonstrated in deed.

To be honest, we need this God. We are just like the Israelites looking for quick satisfactions in our idols, and delighting in them. Only a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin can deal with the most broken, arrogant, and sinful us. But, he not only deals with us, but he makes a way for us in Jesus. Jesus embodied *all* of these characteristics that God proclaimed to Moses, AND he died the death that we deserved as our sacrifice. God is able to be our God because of Christ's work on the cross. God showers his grace here by giving the Israelites his law again, defining who he is by word, and eventually giving his people their ultimate Savior, Jesus.

### ***III. Law (Exodus 34:10-28)***

We see the law being given to Moses again as God reiterates that he is making a covenant. Verses 11 to 26 seem to have a collection of laws from the 10 Commandments and ceremonial laws. God starts off by commanding the Israelites what **not** to do when they get to Canaan (verses 11 to 17). God is most concerned about their loyalty and covenant to him. In most ancient cultures, polytheism was the norm. Thus, Israel only having one God was distinct. God wanted an exclusive relationship, as his name was Jealous, and he is a jealous God. When we think of the word jealous, in our limited and cultural knowledge, we associate it to a feeling of resentfulness of rivalry. However, the *primary* definition of jealousy is actually "fiercely protective." It is a zeal to preserve something supremely precious. This is why God commanded the Israelites, and in Christ to us, not to worship any other god: because he needed to protect what is supremely precious to him: his people.

God also commanded them to tear down the altars and pillars of idols in Canaan. He did not want his people to be tempted, or led astray because God cared about the purity of his people. Thus, he demanded these idols to be destroyed completely.

He also commanded his people to keep the three festivals: (1) Feast of Unleavened Bread, where they ate bread without yeast, which symbolized their separation from sin, and it was to remind them of their deliverance from Egypt, (2) the Feast of Weeks, where they offered their firstfruits of their harvest to God, and (3) the Feast of Ingathering, where their work was done and crops were safely gathered. These last two feasts were to remind them of their years in the wilderness, and God's providential care in it.

He also commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath, which was the seventh day of rest after working six days. This was so that his people could continue to trust in God's provision, especially when they are not working. He knows the fallen condition of our hearts and motivations as we live busy and distracted lives. Thus, He commands rest because the more completely we dedicate our rest to him, the more effectively we live for him in our work weeks.

Although this collage of laws may seem unorganized, we need to understand the context behind it for clarity. Just to reiterate, Israel had just committed this great sin of the golden calf, but in God's mercy and favor, they were forgiven. So now, God was giving them another opportunity to live for his glory. These series of regulations and laws were to help the Israelites keep their covenant with God, in ways that they had initially broken, and keep them from worshipping idols like the Canaanites. These laws were boundaries that helped them stay in love with God.

**Spoiler Alert:** Unfortunately, the Israelites fail to keep God's law. Actually, no one on this earth is able to keep God's law, and everyone is found guilty before God. John Calvin states that in the law, "God appears only as the rewarder of perfect righteousness...and as the upright and strict Judge of sins." But God does not leave his people at a dead end with the law. He fulfills the law in Jesus Christ. Jesus perfectly obeyed God's laws and fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf. Richard Gaffin characterizes it as, "Outside of Christ, the law is *an enemy that condemns* (original: "a condemnatory enemy"). In Christ, it becomes a 'friendly guide' for life with God." Thus, although the law no longer condemns us, it also

does not become extinct. Rather, God uses it to sanctify us and make us holy, like him.

#### **IV. More Grace (Exodus 34:29-35)**

I don't know about you guys, but just considering these sections of our passage, I am overwhelmed by God's grace to his people. God could've been ungracious and unmerciful to the people who easily betrayed him and replaced him with an idol, *which he almost did*. But his character wouldn't allow it, and even after giving the law, God gives more grace to his people in the shining face of Moses.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the two tablets, he didn't know it, but his face was shining so much that the Israelites were afraid to come near him. Thus, when Moses spoke to the Israelites as a mediator, he wore a veil to cover his shining face. But when he went back into the tent to speak to God, he took off the veil. Moses had an unveiled access to God. This shining was not a one time occurrence, but every time Moses went to speak with God, he would leave the conversation with the rays of God's glory on his face.

In the shining of Moses' face, we see **(1) the glory of God**, as he reflected God's glory. **(2) the glory of God's mediator**. As Moses spoke on behalf of God to the Israelites, he stood as the mediator. The shining of Moses' face was necessary because the Israelites were beginning to question his authority after the golden calf incident. God authenticated Moses and his words through the shining of his face. We also see that **(3) God amazingly is able to reveal his glory through sinners, and allows them to experience his glory personally**. Moses was a chosen Prophet and mediator of God, but he was still a sinful and broken man, just like us. However, as Moses spent time with God, his face was transformed. Likewise, when we are with God, he transforms us. It is the natural effect of *being with God*. When we take our eyes off of ourselves, and seek his face, he illuminates us. The glory comes from looking at God. The fact that God wants to spend time with his weak and broken people, and transform them, demonstrates *more grace*. He was only able to glorify Moses because he found favor in God's eyes, and God is able to glorify us because Jesus found favor in God's eyes. Which brings us to the last point that we see **(4) the glory of the gospel**. As gracious as God was in these two chapters, the reality was that the

law given through Moses was not sufficient. It could not bring full and final salvation. However, Moses is a shadow that points us forward to Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is perfect and permanent. While Moses could only be a reflection of God, Jesus inherently radiates the glory of God from his divine being. Augustine says that the law was only a step to glory, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the summit of glory. And what is at this summit, you may ask? All of Scripture and the laws of God culminate in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. Our holy and merciful God, came down to us, not as a pillar of cloud, but as the Son of God. He kept and obeyed God's law fully. He was in direct communication with God. He was merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...He forgave iniquity, transgression, and sin. This perfect Mediator died on the cross for you and me, and was raised up on the third day defeating sin and death. Jesus tore this veil so that we can enter the inner structure of the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, to meet with the Almighty God freely. Not only that, God gives his Holy Spirit to those who believe in Jesus, so that he can tabernacle/dwell in the center of our hearts forever. We don't have to carry a tent and go on retreats to meet with God. He is right here with us.

God was separated from the Israelites because of their sin. He made it quite clear that his holiness could not coexist with sin. He gave the law as another opportunity to live for God, but they could not escape sin. Hundreds and thousands of years later, we still wrestle with our stubborn and habitual sins. So how does God fix this sin problem? By Jesus becoming sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Friends, I'm not sure where you are in your faith... Maybe you've been in the wilderness for way too long. Or maybe there is a stubborn sin that fills your heart with shame and fear... Jesus died for you and your sins because he loves you. And he promised to come back again, and when he does... God will dwell with us, we will be his people, and he will be with us as our God. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And He will make *all* things new (Revelation 21:3-5). Until that day, let's press on and trust in his merciful character, and loving gift of Christ to us. Let's pray.