

# Justice & Grace

Life in the Wilderness: Part 9  
Exodus 34

## Questions

1. The sermon talks about God "**rewinding the tape**" to give Israel a fresh start after they broke their promise. When you look back at your own life, when have you experienced a time where God graciously gave you a "rewind" or a second chance after a major failure?
2. God reveals Himself as **Yahweh**—the self-existent "I AM" who doesn't depend on anyone or anything. How does pausing to think about how massive, eternal, and independent God is help put your current worries or anxieties into perspective?
3. Knowing that God is "**slow to anger**" and has a "long fuse" with your weaknesses, how can you practice that same kind of patient, "long-nosed" grace with the people in your life who tend to frustrate or fail you?
4. The cross is where God's perfect **justice** and perfect **mercy** meet so that we don't have to carry our own guilt. In what specific areas of your life are you still trying to "pay for your own mistakes" instead of fully resting in the forgiveness Jesus already bought for you?
5. We sometimes focus so much on God's **love** that we forget His **holiness**, or focus so much on His **rules** that we forget His **mercy**. Which side do you tend to lean toward?
6. The message talks about carrying guilt around like a **heavy backpack**. How does knowing that God forgives all kinds of mistakes help you drop that weight?
7. The Bible says God's anger lasts for a few generations, but His love lasts for **thousands** of generations. How does that contrast make you feel about Him?
8. When Moses realized how good God was, he immediately fell to the ground and **worshiped**. What is one thing about God's character that makes you want to stop and thank Him right now?
9. The sermon mentions that spending time with God changes us from the inside out—giving us more peace, more joy, or more patience. Where have you seen **slow, steady growth** in your own life?
10. What is **one simple, practical step** you can take this week to clear out some time, quiet your mind, and spend time in God's presence through prayer or reading the Bible?

## Summary

Before there were streaming services, before there were DVDs, way back in the 1900s there were VHS tapes. Back in the day, we'd go to a movie store, look and find a movie, go home and watch the movie, and then get in the car and bring it back to the movie store the next day. It's kind of crazy to reflect on all the steps we took as compared with today. But before you returned that VHS tape, what were you supposed to do? Be kind and rewind. Rewind the tape so it could start at the beginning for the next person. As we come to Exodus chapter 34, God is "rewinding the tape" with His people, so to speak. God is renewing the covenant which the people had broken.

## The Broken Covenant and Moses' Intercession

God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. He brought them to Mount Sinai to give them His law, His good design for how His people would live and flourish. In chapter 24, the people responded to God with a clear commitment: *"All that the Lord has spoken we will do."* A covenant was made—a binding relationship. God would be their God, and they would be His people. But almost immediately, the covenant is broken.

While Moses is on the mountain receiving instructions for the tabernacle—this special tent where God would dwell among His people—the people grow impatient. They wonder where Moses is and if he is coming back to them. In their impatience and uncertainty, their hearts drift back to what is familiar. So they make a golden calf, which is what they were familiar with during their time in Egypt. This false god leads to all sorts of sin: false worship, idolatry, sexual immorality, and the list goes on and on. To sum it up, Israel sinned big time, and with that, they broke the covenant with God.

At first when this happened, God said, *I'm not going with this people to the promised land.* God says of them, "They are a stiff-necked people." They will not turn to me, and so, my presence will not go with them. God says, *I will still give you the land. I will send an angel with you, but My presence will not go with this people.*

But Moses intercedes. He stands in the gap and talks to the Lord. He brings to attention God's promises and God's faithfulness. Moses is appealing to the character of who God is, and towards the end of this conversation, God says that, yes, He will indeed go with the people.

Moses isn't quite done yet, because he makes one final request: "Lord, show me Your glory." This wasn't out of arrogance or just a curiosity of Moses. No, this request was an assurance. Moses is basically asking of God, *give me a down payment; give me proof that you will indeed go with us.* God responds by saying, *Moses, you cannot see My full glory on display, because it would overwhelm you and you would die. But here is what I will do: I will place you in the cleft of the rock, I will pass by you, and I will reveal a*

*glimpse of My glory*—not the fullness, but what we might call the afterglow. God also says, “*I will proclaim My name, the LORD, in your presence.*” When God says I will proclaim my name, He is saying, “*I will reveal who I am. I will make my character known.*” What happens next in Exodus 34 is the fulfillment of what God says. In chapter 34, we are given one of the clearest self-revelations of God in all of Scripture. This proclamation, what we might call a mini-sermon that God preaches about himself, is repeated and referenced throughout the rest of the Old Testament. What is revealed of God steadied Moses, reassured Israel, and is meant to continue to strengthen us as well. If we want to grow in our faith, if we want to know God more deeply, we must dwell on who He really is—not on who we imagine Him to be or who we might prefer Him to be, but on who He has revealed Himself to be.

This is where we often struggle. Our view of God at times can become distorted. Sometimes we emphasize His grace and minimize His holiness. Other times we focus so heavily on His justice that we lose sight of His mercy. We struggle to hold together the fullness of who God is. Those distortions often become most apparent during seasons of failure, suffering, and uncertainty—very much the kind of season Israel is walking through after the golden calf incident. In moments like those, we desperately need to be anchored again in who God actually is.

There is something else happening in this passage that we cannot miss. This revelation does not simply give Moses information about God; it leaves a mark on him. When Moses comes down the mountain, his face is radiant. The glory he beholds begins to show up in him. For us, it is similar. As we spend time with God and behold who He is, we are not left unchanged. When we behold our God and spend time in His presence, we begin to reflect Him, and we ourselves are transformed.

## **The Proclamation of Yahweh's Character**

Let's look at Exodus 34, verses 1–4:

*The Lord said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”*

So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands.

God is beginning the process of renewing the covenant when He tells Moses to chisel out two new stone tablets. Moses had broken the first tablets in anger when he came

down the mountain and saw the people worshiping the golden calf and all that was taking place. That breaking of the tablets wasn't just about Moses' anger; he was angry, but it was also symbolic. The breaking of the stone tablets was symbolic of the people breaking the covenant they had made with God. But now, in grace, God is giving them a "rewind"—a renewed covenant and a restored relationship.

Moses does as the Lord asks. He carves out the tablets, takes them in his hands, and goes up the mountain. All of this sets the stage for what God said would happen when He would place Moses in the cleft of the rock. Look at verses 5–7:

*Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."*

Notice how God begins by proclaiming: "*The LORD, the LORD...*" In the Bible, repetition is used for emphasis. For us, if we want to emphasize something, we might use an exclamation point. But there were no exclamation points in the original languages of the Bible, and so repetition was one way emphasis was communicated. Think about when Jesus taught and He would say: "Truly, truly..." or in older translations: "Verily, verily..." In this, Jesus was saying: "Pay attention to this." So here in Exodus 34, God begins: "*The LORD, the LORD...*" Pay attention. This matters.

Notice "LORD" is in all capital letters. When you see that in your Bible, it is translating God's covenant name: Yahweh. This is the personal name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Yahweh means: "I AM WHO I AM." The self-existent One. The eternal One. The One who depends on nothing and no one.

Before time existed, before God created time, God existed. Before the universe came into being, God was there from eternity past. He is the eternal "I AM." That should humble us as finite creatures. That God is the great "I AM", the self-existent one, points to how great, majestic, and awesome God is.

## **Anatomy of God's Heart: Grace, Patience, and Forgiveness**

God doesn't merely reveal that He exists; He reveals what He is like. He says: "*The compassionate and gracious God...*" Some translations say "*merciful and gracious.*" Those words are closely connected, but there is a distinction. **Mercy** means God does not give us what we deserve. **Grace** means that God gives us what we don't deserve. Israel deserved judgment for the golden calf. God would be perfectly just to destroy

them. Yet God shows mercy by not giving them what they deserve. Then He shows grace by renewing the covenant, remaining with them, and continuing to call them His people. God doesn't just withhold judgment; He continues to pour out undeserved favor.

Then God continues and says He is "slow to anger." The Hebrew phrase literally means "long of nose." When we hear "long nose," we might think of Pinocchio and being a liar, but in Hebrew, this was an expression for patience. Think about what happens when a person gets angry: their face gets hot, their nostrils flare, and their nose and cheeks turn red. The picture is that God's anger is not quick or impulsive. He is "long of nose." It takes a long time for His nose to turn red. In other words, God is patient. To use another image, God has a long fuse.

God's anger is real. He does get angry, but it's a righteous anger. It is never rash or out of control. He is slow to anger; He is patient. Aren't you thankful for that? Through all our seasons of weakness, wandering, and sin, God is patient, compassionate, merciful, gracious, and slow to anger. As we are told in the New Testament book of 2nd Peter, chapter 3, God "*is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*"

As we continue, God says He is: "abounding in love and faithfulness..." This is covenant language. God overflows. Like a cup of water overflowing, this is God in His love and faithfulness. This means that God is dependable no matter the circumstances and challenges in our lives. We as humans can be so fickle in our loyalty to one another, but not so with the Lord. He is loyal. He is always reliable. He will never leave or forsake us. Continuing into verse 7, God says: "*maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*" Some translations use the words *iniquity, transgression, and sin*. Taken together, they paint a complete picture of human failure:

11. **Sin** means to miss the mark, like an archer aiming at a target but missing it. God has given us His good and holy standard, yet we miss the mark.
12. **Transgression** means to cross a line. It's the picture of a boundary that has been clearly established, like a "No Trespassing" sign, where something in us immediately wants to cross over anyway. God says, "Don't go there. It will harm you," yet we knowingly step across the boundary.
13. **Iniquity** speaks to our crookedness and corruption—our tendency to turn away from what is right and good and choose what is wrong.

But don't miss the main point: God forgives all of it. The emphasis is not on the different categories of sin, but on the greatness of God's forgiveness. He forgives sins of failure, acts of rebellion, and deep-rooted wickedness. Guilt and shame can feel like carrying around a heavy backpack that never comes off. We replay our failures and wonder whether God could really forgive what we've done, convincing ourselves that we have gone beyond the reach of God's grace. But Exodus 34 says otherwise. Whatever

category your failure falls into, it is not beyond the mercy and grace of God because God's heart is forgiveness.

## Understanding the Tension: Just and the Justifier

We might wish the verse ended with *"maintaining love to thousands."* That seems like a good place to stop. But then comes this difficult statement: *"Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."*

What does that mean? Elsewhere in Scripture, God clearly teaches that children are not condemned for the sins of their parents. For example, in Ezekiel 18, the people were repeating a proverb: *"The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"*—meaning, "Our parents sinned, and we're suffering for it." But God rejects that idea, stating that each person is responsible for his own sin. The parent who sins is accountable for that sin, and the child is not condemned for the guilt of the parent. So, Exodus 34 cannot mean God punishes children for their parents' wrongdoing. Part of the idea here is that sin has generational consequences. Parents shape children. A father who rejects God may influence his children and grandchildren to drift further from the Lord. Patterns of addiction, anger, or abuse can ripple through generations like ripples from a rock thrown in a pond.

But the main emphasis of this verse is actually the contrast. Judgment is described to the "third and fourth generation," but God's steadfast love extends to "thousands." God's judgment is real, but His mercy and grace far exceed it. The emphasis is on the extravagant grace, mercy, faithfulness, and compassion of the LORD that extends to thousands of generations.

Even so, Exodus 34 does not let us escape a deep tension: How can God be both just and gracious at the same time? How can God say He will *"not leave the guilty unpunished,"* and yet also describe Himself as forgiving "wickedness, rebellion, and sin"?

God cannot simply excuse sin. He does not sweep it under the rug and move on. He is the perfect Judge of all the earth, so He must punish sin. This tension is not fully resolved in the Old Testament; it remained until the cross. At the cross, God's justice and God's mercy meet. God does not ignore sin—He deals with it. He places our sin on Jesus, who bears its full penalty in our place. And at the same time, we, the guilty, receive mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

The apostle Paul writes this in Romans 3:25–26:

*"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who*

*justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”*

At the cross, the justice of God and the mercy of God meet. Our sin is paid for, fully, through the death of Jesus. For all who trust in Christ as their substitute, there is forgiveness and reconciliation with God. What God revealed about Himself to Moses, we now find even more deeply in the person and work of Jesus.

## **Worship and Spiritual Transformation**

When we behold and stand in the presence of the Lord, reflecting on His goodness, our response should be like that of Moses in Exodus 34:8:

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

When we meditate on who God is, His love, His mercy, and His steadfast commitment to us, it should lead us to worship and praise, giving humble thanks to our gracious and merciful God. If you desire to be overwhelmed and moved by who God is, you must commit yourself to God’s Word, because this is where He has chosen to reveal Himself. Placing ourselves under His Word does not only lead us to worship; it also changes us.

Look at verse 29:

*When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.*

Moses had been in the presence of God, and it left a visible, physical effect on him. He reflected the glory of God because he spent time with Him. The Apostle Paul picks up on this principle for us in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*

Paul is saying that what happened to Moses physically is now happening to believers spiritually. As we behold the glory of the Lord in Christ Jesus, we are being progressively, spiritually transformed. We don’t walk around with a glowing face, but here is what that begins to look like in your life:

- Peace where there used to be anxiety.
- Joy even in challenging circumstances.
- A growing prayer life and a deeper hunger for God’s Word.
- Endurance in trials that used to overwhelm you.
- Gentleness and patience in relationships that used to fracture easily.
- A sensitivity to sin: seeing it more clearly, feeling its weight, and growing in the desire to put it to death.

If you have been in the presence of the Lord, you will be shaped by what you behold. To grow as a follower of Jesus, you must reflect on and meditate on the goodness of God

as revealed in His Word. Make time during your day to spend time in the presence of God in prayer and behold the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. As you do, you will be transformed more and more into His image.