

“Exodus”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 7

“Exodus 34”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

In Exodus 34 we come to the second period of time when Moses would spend 40 days and 40 nights with *YHWH* on the mountain. In this account, *YHWH* will reaffirm His relationship with Israel, and fulfill His promise to Moses of showing him a divine manifestation.¹ Moses is instructed to make preparations for his encounter with God. A part of these preparations were the cutting of two tablets from stone to replace the ones that had formerly been broken in the golden calf incident. God says, “I will write” (כְּתַבְתִּי - *cathavthy*) on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which “you” broke. This change in God having carved the first tablets Himself is considered by Scherman to be a reflection of the now lowered status of the nation of Israel because of their “great sin.” He says, that despite all the interventions of Moses on their behalf, and the people’s repentance, the people are no longer restored fully to where they were with regard to their relationship with God before the incident of the golden calf.²

Cassuto, however, chooses to focus on the writing of the second tablets, seeing this account as a witness to the covenant

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 215.

² Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah publications Ltd., 2014), p. 507.

that was renewed rather than focusing upon the carving of the tablets.³ In the past others have postulated that the reason for this change in the supplying of the tablets was because there would be the temptation toward idolatry if the tablets were carved by God Himself. The change in the carving of the tablets would then seem to seek to remedy this temptation toward idolatry. Childs says that "... there is no sign that this difference carried any significance for the narrator." He sees the focus to be on the fact that God says that He will write the same words that were on the former tablets on these new tablets. These instructions appear to be a concrete sign that Israel had been forgiven, or at least would be, and the relationship restored, at least from God's side.⁴ Rashi thinks it is simply because Moses had smashed the first tablets that God told him to carve the second ones.⁵ Our curiosity here is left unsatisfied, with endless speculation ensuing but it appears certain that God expects to restore covenant with Israel.

³ U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), p. 438.

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in The Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: 1976), p. 611.

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1 (New York NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 348, FN. 1.

In verse 2, Moses is told to be ready in the morning and to come up Mount Sinai and to present himself to God on the top of the mountain. There is an indication here that the revelation that God is going to give to Moses is in answer to His previous promise to reveal His “goodness” to him when he is to stand in the cleft of the crag.⁶ In verse 3, we are told that “no one,” and “no animal,” is to be on the mountain, or to even be in front of the mountain. This time, Aaron is excluded too, perhaps a reminder of his role in the breach of the former covenant.⁷ Ramban indicates that the solitary nature of Moses’ second ascent up the mountain was to give him honor by making it plain that the second tablets were given only due to the piety, prayers, and intervention, of Moses on behalf of Israel.⁸

In verse 4, we are informed that Moses cut two stone tablets like the previous ones and then he arose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai just as *YHWH* had commanded him. He took with him the two stone tablets that he had previously cut. Moses observes carefully the instructions of *YHWH* in regard to

⁶ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 348, N. 2.

⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 215.

⁸ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 508.

the giving of the writings of the covenant. When he does all of this, God descends in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed “the name,” *YHWH*. As verse 6 begins we are told that *YHWH* is proclaiming His own name, twice, a name that means God is the self-existent One. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the precise formula used here is to be found (יהוה אלהינו - *YHWH YHWH EL*). God is the existent one that is dependent upon no one, or nothing else, for that existence.⁹ God is fulfilling the promise to Moses of revealing Himself, and here He gives a “virtual exegesis” of Himself.¹⁰ In His own words He is revealing something about His nature to Moses.

In order to get acquainted with someone, conversation is important and the common avenue of human beings to build relationship with another person. Moses sought to get to know *YHWH* personally, he asked God about Himself (33:18), he listened to the responses. The answer to Moses’ request to “know” God is answered here in 34:6-7. In this section, God reveals several of His divine attributes, crucial elements of His core nature. “This

⁹ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

¹⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, in the Interpretation series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 301.

passage is one of the most important theological texts in all of Scripture, because it is the only place where God actually describes Himself, listing His own glorious attributes.”¹¹ He does this here without intermediary. In these verses we find God revealing to Moses the things about Himself that are important for him to know and also those things that stand at the core of His true self.

The importance of this passage, as foundational for biblical theology, is to be seen by the fact that this statement is repeated many times in other parts of the Old Testament in various permutations (Numbers 14:18;¹² Nehemiah 9:17;¹³ Psalms

¹¹ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

¹² **“The LORD is very patient and absolutely loyal, forgiving wrongs and disloyalty. Yet he doesn’t forgo all punishment, disciplining the grandchildren and great-grandchildren for their ancestors’ wrongs.”** CEB.

¹³ **They refused to obey, and didn’t remember the wonders that you accomplished in their midst. They acted arrogantly and decided to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, merciful and compassionate, very patient, and truly faithful. You didn’t forsake them.** CEB.

103:8;¹⁴ 17-18;¹⁵ 145:8-9;¹⁶ Jeremiah 32:18-19;¹⁷ Joel 2:13;¹⁸ and

Jonah 4:2¹⁹). Echoes of this self-revelation also appear in

Deuteronomy 5:9-10²⁰; Lamentations 3:32;²¹ Daniel 9:4;²² and

Nahum 1:3.²³ This should make it clear that the Biblical writers

regarded Exodus 34:6-7 as a foundational statement about God.

For some strange reason however this great passage has received

¹⁴ **The LORD is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love.** CEB.

¹⁵ **But the LORD's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now for those who honor him. And God's righteousness reaches to the grandchildren ¹⁸ of those who keep his covenant and remember to keep his commands.** CEB.

¹⁶ **"The LORD is merciful and compassionate, very patient, and full of faithful love. ⁹ The LORD is good to everyone and everything; God's compassion extends to all his handiwork!"** CEB.

¹⁷ **You act with mercy toward thousands upon thousands, but you also bring the consequences of the fathers' sins on their children after them. Great and mighty God, whose name is the LORD of heavenly forces, ¹⁹ marvelous are your purposes, and mighty are your deeds. You are aware of all the ways of humanity, and you reward us for how we live and what we do even now.** CEB.

¹⁸ **tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.** CEB.

¹⁹ **He prayed to the LORD, "Come on, LORD! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy.** CEB.

²⁰ **Do not bow down to them or worship them because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins—even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. ¹⁰ But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.** CEB.

²¹ **Although he has caused grief, he will show compassion in measure with his covenant loyalty.** CEB.

²² **As I prayed to the LORD my God, I made this confession: Please, my Lord—you are the great and awesome God, the one who keeps the covenant, and truly faithful to all who love him and keep his commands:** CEB.

²³ **The LORD is very patient but great in power; the LORD punishes. His way is in whirlwind and storm; clouds are the dust of his feet.** CEB.

very little attention from systematic theologians. Seldom has this passage been given detailed attention as a foundational text for understanding the character, nature, and attributes of God.²⁴

This self-revelation of *YHWH* is set in the midst of one of the spiritual low points in the history of Israel. They had breached the newly enacted covenant, even before the ink was dry, by committing a “great sin.” Three failures can be noted on the part of Israel. First, Israel failed to recognize their exclusive allegiance to *YHWH*, with whom they had entered into covenant. This should have been clear as the first of the Ten Commandments stated, “You will have no other gods before me” (20:3), but the people demanded of Aaron to “make us gods who will go before us.” Secondly, Israel failed to acknowledge that it was *YHWH*, not Moses, who delivered them from Egypt. Thirdly, the Israelites failed to rely upon their mediator appointed by *YHWH*, who was Moses. Israel focused the wrong kind of attention on Moses as humans are prone to do. When Moses stayed on the mountain longer than they had anticipated the people gave up hope and sought someone else, some other human being to lead them.²⁵

²⁴ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

²⁵ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

They lack stamina, loyalty, and just plain good sense. They failed to trust God.

In the past *YHWH* has revealed Himself to Moses through His works in relationship with His people. Now, in verses 6-7, He reveals Himself through the direct words that He delivers to Moses. The very first thing that *YHWH* reveals about Himself is that He is compassionate. The type of love described here (רחום - *rahum* - Hebrew - οἰκτίρων - *oiktiron* - compassionate) is descriptive of a deep love, rooted in a natural bond. This love is usually that of a superior in status (such as God, or a parent), for an inferior in status (a human being, or a child), such as a father's love for his children (Psalm 103:13²⁶).²⁷ Girdlestone indicates this word expresses, "a deep and tender feeling of compassion, such as is aroused by the sight of weakness or suffering in those that are dear to us or need our help."²⁸

This same word is used in the Old Testament thirteen times with twelve of these occurrences referring to God, and one

²⁶ **Like a parent feels compassion for their children—that's how the LORD feels compassion for those who honor him.** CEB.

²⁷ J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

²⁸ R. B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 127.

referring to man (Psalm 112:4²⁹). When this word is used of God it points to the strong bond that He has with those that He calls His children. He looks upon His people in a manner similar to the way that mothers and fathers look upon their children. He has a deep concern for their needs and has tender feelings of love for them; deep compassion. Another concept associated with the compassion of *YHWH* is His unconditional choosing of the recipient of His compassion (Exodus 33:19³⁰). The compassion of God is extended to whomever He wishes by His sovereign decree. To those whom He chooses to bestow compassion they are then linked to the faithfulness of God (Deuteronomy 4:31³¹).³²

The second fact that *YHWH* wanted Moses to know about Himself is that He is “gracious” (חַנּוּן *channun*). This is a word that depicts a heartfelt response by someone who gives to one that is in need. It is a verb that usually is used when a stronger person is coming to help a weaker person who has a need, but that weaker

²⁹ **They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous.** CEB.

³⁰ **The LORD said, “I’ll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I’ll proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD.’ I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate.** CEB.

³¹ **because the LORD your God is a compassionate God. He won’t let you go, he won’t destroy you, and he won’t forget the covenant that he swore to your ancestors.** CEB.

³² J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

person has no legitimate claim for expecting favorable treatment.

Most of the usages of this word in the Hebrew Bible have *YHWH* as the subject. It is used when Jacob explained to His brother Esau that his family and property were due to the fact that God had “dealt graciously” with him (Genesis 33:5,11). When David fasted and prayed for his dying son, David said, “Who knows, *YHWH* may be gracious to me, that the child may live” (2 Samuel 12:22).

Showing this kind of grace appears to be expressed as a divine prerogative, an act of sheer sovereignty. The word “gracious” is found thirteen times in the Old Testament, eleven times in combination with “compassionate” (רחום - *rahum*).³³

Almost all occurrences of this word (חַנּוּן *channun*) in the Hebrew Bible refer to God.³⁴ The only exception to this is Psalm 112:4³⁵ where it appears that a “righteous man” is the one who is described as “merciful,” or “gracious.” It is likely the case that *YHWH* and the “righteous man” share this same characteristic

³³ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

³⁴ Exodus 22:27; 34:6; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.

³⁵ **They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous.** CEB.

which is an attribute of God.³⁶ This attribute, that is used to describe the God fearing person, also reflects itself in the kindness people extend to others. However in human beings things are different in that God's graciousness is unbiased, or without hope of reward, or recompense: He has no ulterior motives that are focused in selfishness.³⁷ With human beings the motives are most often not pure and can reflect some sense of self-interest even when they are at their very best.

YHWH is also described as “slow to anger” (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם - *erek affayem*). When God becomes angry it is not sinful, or evil. His anger is grounded in His holy character, that is, He is offended by the sinful and evil rebellion of His creatures. Despite the fact that God does get angry, He is not quick to become angry. The Hebrew expression אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם - *erek affayem* (“slow to anger”) is used ten times in the Bible to refer to God's patience in dealing with those who arouse His “hot anger.” God's being “slow to anger” means that He takes a long time before He gets angry. He holds His anger in abeyance, but that does not mean that His anger never rises.

³⁶ Edwin Yamauchi, “*hannûn* Gracious,” in R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 303-304.

³⁷ J. Carl Laney, “God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

God is not only gracious, merciful, and slow to anger, but He is also righteous and just. His righteousness demands that He not leave sin unpunished. This passage indicates that God is not quick to jump to judgement.³⁸ The fact remains however that He still values justice and will see it done.

God is “abounding in steadfast love” (רַב־חֶסֶד - *rav hesed*)

The first word in this combination, the adjective רַב - *rav*, is used to modify the word that follows indicating what is present, is present in abundant quantity, or quality. This phrase combination occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament.³⁹ Following this phrase is the word “faithfulness” (אֱמֶת - *emeth*). Some have expressed that these two words (*hesed* and *emeth*) are meant to express a single figure of speech.⁴⁰ Cassuto says this combination expresses a single attribute, “...since lovingkindness and truth are dual elements of a unitary quality—lovingkindness of truth, true and faithful lovingkindness.”⁴¹ The Hebrew word *Hesed* (חֶסֶד) is variously translated as “lovingkindness” (KJV, NASB), “love” (NIV),

³⁸ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

³⁹ Genesis 24:49; 47:29; Exodus 34:6; Joshua 2:14; 2 Samuel 2:6; 15:20; Psalms 25:10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 89:14; Proverbs 3:3; 20:28.

⁴⁰ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

⁴¹ U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 439.

or “steadfast love” (NRSV), and has the basic meaning of “unfailing love” or “loyalty.”⁴²

YHWH's “loyal love” is an undeserved, selective affection; by which God binds Himself to His people for their benefit. God grants blessings beyond any that are deserved or could justly be expected. The love of God is wrapped up in the character of God Himself and it will never diminish, or fail because He is its source.⁴³ This word *Hesed* is an extremely important word and a tremendous amount has been written on it (whole books in fact⁴⁴) and as one might expect there are many theories and much speculation regarding this word. However, most importantly, understanding something of the power of this word helps us to understand the power and depth of the love of God. In Psalm 136:1 we are told that the “*hesed*” of God is everlasting.⁴⁵

In 34:7 there is a powerful statement that begins by stating that *hesed* (God's steadfast love) is kept to the thousandth generation. In this verse there is a contrast made between love

⁴² J. Carl Laney, “God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

⁴³ J. Carl Laney, “God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

⁴⁴ Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, in the Harvard Semitic Museum Harvard Semitic Monographs series (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1978).

⁴⁵ Give praise to *YHWH* because he is good, because (His) faithful love (*hesed*) lasts forever!

and justice. Clearly the balance of the scales is tipped greatly in favor of love, but it is important to know that God is not unjust and that He does not simply “clear” (נָקָה - *naqah*) the guilty. This word indicates that God does retain a concern for justice, but somehow a deep and abiding “love” from God is even more prominent than this aspect of justice. This word (*hesed*) is most commonly associated with the concept of “mercy” or “pity” in the Torah. Sakenfeld says of this word, “A single word expressed the utter dependence of the people upon Yahweh and his willingness and ability to deliver them. A single word communicated the promised faithfulness of God upon which the people could base their cry for help and the surprising faithfulness of God which transcended even his own descriptions of judgment upon his people. God preserved the covenant community even in its failure, in accordance with his own commitment to the people - a sure and everlasting *hesed*, great beyond any human expectation.”⁴⁶

As was indicated earlier the word *hesed* is closely associated with the Hebrew word *emeth* (אֱמֶת - *firmness, faithfulness truth, reliability, stability, reliability*). The basic idea of both the verb

⁴⁶ Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, pp. 238-239.

and the noun is that of “firmness, certainty, and dependability.” This is a word that is frequently applied to God as a characteristic of His divine nature as something that is a reflection of who and what He is. As a characteristic of God it is the means through which people can come to know Him and serve Him (1 Kings 2:4;⁴⁷ Psalms 25:5;⁴⁸ 26:3⁴⁹). Here in Exodus 34:6 the emphasis is possibly on “truth,” or possibly on “faithfulness.” Both of these aspects are equally true of God. The concept of reliability, stability and faithfulness seem to be fundamental to the meaning of this word when it is applied to God. He is reliable and faithful, His words can be trusted.⁵⁰

At verse 7 we return once again to the word *hesed* where the focus appears to be on the “steadfast love” of God followed by a statement regarding the consequence of this great “steadfast love,” which is the forgiveness of “iniquity,” “transgression,” and “sin.” The reason for this forgiveness is rooted in this “love” of God.”

⁴⁷ **Then the LORD will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: ‘If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.’** NRSV.

⁴⁸ **Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.** NRSV.

⁴⁹ **For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.** NRSV.

⁵⁰ J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

There is here too an indication that when offenders persist in their offense they cannot have the expectation of simply expecting to be acquitted in spite of all the tremendous love and faithfulness of God.⁵¹ The forgiveness of God is not meant to be taken for granted as if it is “cheap grace.”

The latter part of verse 7 is troubling to our sense of justice as we claim at least to think that the one who commits the offense is the one who deserves the punishment. As those on the receiving end of judgment we are more than happy to accept mercy that we know is not deserved for ourselves. We see here displayed two sides of the nature of God, His great mercy, but also His justice. God delights in forgiveness and mercy, but this does not abrogate His justice. “Those who refuse to repent are responsible before the holy God.”⁵² God is merciful to the extreme, but we must never in our arrogance and pride take for granted His mercy as an excuse, or as a license to sin. The balance, though is not equal here, God leans toward mercy in a way that gives far more than we deserve, or should expect. This is demonstrated by forgiving to the thousandth generation while only holding

⁵¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 349, N. 7.

⁵² J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001), pp. 36-51.

transgressions to the third, or fourth generation (.3 to .4% for those that like numbers).

All of this might be of deep concern to us, but one of the differences between the old covenant and the new covenant is found exactly here. We often conflate and blend the two covenants and that can lead to confusion and undue distress. This is perhaps one of those places. One of the great passages of hope given by the prophets is to be found in Jeremiah 31:29-34.⁵³ To be sure the sins of parents are so often passed onto children, but the implication of the passage in Exodus 34:7 is that God actually “visits” (דָּקַף - *poqad*) the “iniquity” of the “fathers” upon the children. To be fair this is a long and complex discussion that has many twists and turns to it. Ezekiel also talks about this issue at

⁵³ ²⁹ **In those days, people will no longer say:
Sour grapes eaten by parents
leave a bitter taste
in the mouths of their children.**

³⁰ **Because everyone will die
for their own sins:
whoever eats sour grapes
will have a bitter taste
in their own mouths.**

³¹ **The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³² It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ They will no longer need to teach each other to say, “Know the LORD!” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins. CEB.**

18:20.⁵⁴ The focus in Exodus seems to be on the fact that God is merciful infinitely more than He is focused upon justice; this can be seen not simply as some form of abstract part of His nature, but in the reality of His dealings with people, especially with Israel. There is however, no license given for sin that could take for granted the mercy of God.

The response of Moses to the words of God are suitable and appropriate for us all (verse 8) as at the conclusion of these words, he bows and he worships. This should be our response too. We are all too quick to seek to judge God, which is wholly inappropriate and in reality futile. We have no control over God nor any right to judge Him and we have no ability to sanction God in any way. He is God, and our very breath is a gift from Him. How dare the pot judge the potter.⁵⁵ We need to recognize our place, and to do otherwise is to approach God with an arrogance that will not turn out well for us. We are limited creatures approaching the unlimited, eternal, sovereign of the universe. We must not forget our place, to do so is an act of sin and rebellion.

⁵⁴ **Only the one who sins will die. A child won't bear a parent's guilt, and a parent won't bear a child's guilt. Those who do right will be declared innocent, and the wicked will be declared guilty.** CEB.

⁵⁵ cf. Romans 9

Moses, after bowing and worshipping, boldly pleads for YHWH to go with the people to the land (34:10): in other words he wants the original covenant with God restored. He pleads for mercy and forgiveness in spite of the nature and response of the people. He asks God to take this unworthy and unfaithful people as His inheritance (נְחֻלְתָּנוּ - *nechaltanu*). If this text is any indication the response of God comes swiftly to Moses' request at 34:10 with God agreeing to make a "covenant" and promising to perform marvels such as have not previously been seen. God rewards the trust that Moses has in him by blessing all the people. He promises that He will do great things for them. How powerful is the faith and righteousness of one man in touching the heart of God.

At 34:11 God seems to shift His speech to focus on the people, addressing them through His chosen intermediary Moses. He challenges them to observe what He will command them that day. He then continues with the promise to drive out the people of the land before them. At 34:12 He calls the people to a loyalty to Him that is to be demonstrated by not making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. He warns them that the people of the land

would become a snare to them. He calls upon them to be a force for change in the land, to (34:13) tear down the previous residents altars, pillars, and sacred poles. He gives them the reasoning for this (34:14) in that He is a jealous (𐤒𐤓𐤕-*qanah*) God. The word used here for “to be jealous” also bears the meaning of to become “intensely red” as when something is dyed. His very “name” is Jealous, this is an attribute of His nature and will be borne out in His reactions to any infractions of the covenant that incite Him to react with jealousy.

God is aware of the seductive nature of people living in close proximity with one another and He challenges the people to avoid making a covenant (34:15) with the people of the land because it will lead to other things such as invitations to eat of sacrifices, which would then be prostitution. Making covenants with these people (the people of Canaan) will lead to intermarriage and this too would be seen as prostitution. Israel is bound to God and He calls them to a singular allegiance and devotion to their covenant partner. The emphasis on this aspect of God’s nature is perhaps a reaction to incident with the golden calf.⁵⁶ This will be a repeated

⁵⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 218.

warning in the verses that follow because of the severe danger of falling into apostasy and breaking the covenant.

At 34:17 there is a warning particularly for making “cast idols.” It is interesting to me that even here the English versions hide the fact that the text actually says “gods” (אֱלֹהִי - *elohay*).

They are not to make “cast gods.” Denial seems to be the way that translators can lessen the impact of what had been done by Israel and to somehow depersonalize its nature. The fact is, that the sin of Israel was not impersonal nor distant, but was personal and intimate. The incident of the golden calf was deeply personal to God and it hurt him deeply, because He had allowed Himself to love this people. This can be seen in His passionate warnings to avoid such a thing ever happening again. He then moves on to reminding them of what they had been called to previously in keeping the festival of unleavened bread (34:18) and to redeem the firstborn animals and children (34:19-20). The reminders to rest on the sabbath, even in “plowing” and “harvest” time are given. The reminders of what has previously been given are now repeated (34:21-26).

At 34:27 there is a shift calling Moses to write down the words because in accordance with these words He had made a covenant with you (Moses) and Israel. Moses returns from the mountain after forty days and forty nights neither eating, or drinking water. During this time Moses wrote down the words of the covenant on the tablets (34:28), the ten commandments. In the forty day period previously, the impatience of the Israelites at Moses being on the mountain so long led to the incident of the golden calf. This time would be different. There would be no repeat of that incident, or faithlessness among the Israelites this time. The people would wait and receive Moses as he came down.

At 34:29 Moses came down from the mountain with the two tablets and we are here informed that the face of Moses “shone” (קָרַן - *qaran*). There were rays coming out from his face. The root of the word used here relates to “horns” that would come out from the head of an animal. This led some to have the mistaken perception that Moses grew horns while on the mountain. This is not correct as the text clearly indicates that the “skin of his face” is the source, not his head. This phenomenon was as a result of Moses’ encounter with God on the mountain. At

34:30 we are then told that Aaron and the Israelites saw Moses with his face shining and they were afraid to come near to him. In Jewish tradition the day that Moses descended from the mountain this second time was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Sarna says, “The awe-inspiring radiance emitted by Moses’ face may be introduced as the afterglow of the refulgent splendor of the Divine Presence.”⁵⁷

Moses then calls out to Aaron and the Israelites and they respond and returned to Moses and spoke to him. The Israelites then come and speak to Moses and he gives them the words from God, commanding them to obey all that God had given him when He had spoken with him on Mount Sinai (34:32). All the while he was speaking to the people his face was glowing, and when he finished speaking he put a veil over his face (34:33). The text makes it clear that whenever Moses would go in to speak with *YHWH* and he would remove the veil from his face (34:34) while speaking with God. When he came out from speaking with *YHWH* he would leave the veil off as he spoke with the people and delivered the message from God, and his face would shine. When

⁵⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 220.

he finished delivering his message to Israel from *YHWH* he would put the veil back on his face. In the presence of *YHWH* the radiance is recharged as it were and this radiance “authenticates” the message that Moses has received from God. As a private individual though he veils his face.⁵⁸

This chapter begins with the preparations and then the actual revelation of God to Moses of His divine nature in words directly from *YHWH*. This is a special gift to Moses, to His faithful and humble servant. Moses proves himself over and over again to be faithful to God and also to the Israelites. He does this by seeking to serve God and to serve the Israelites. He stands out as a person that seeks the glory and honor of God and also the forgiveness and restoration of the Israelites into covenant with *YHWH*. This trust that Moses has in God is rewarded and should stand as a beacon for those that followed of what God values in a human being. Moses stood as a great example of faith and trust in God. Today, we have the example of Moses and an even greater example in Jesus Christ. God loves His children and seeks their well-being. He is always faithful, but He will not allow arrogance

⁵⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 221.

and selfishness to abide in the hearts of His children. He knows that these things lead to destruction, to idolatry, and ultimately to separation from God. God calls His children to something better; He calls them to trust Him, and to faithfully follow His ways.

Synopsis

This chapter begins with Moses being instructed to cut new stone tablets before he meets with God for the second time for forty days. He is given clear instructions to go alone and to even keep the animals off the mountain. As the Lord speaks to Moses He calls out His own personal name twice and then reveals detailed aspects of His nature. He chooses to tell Moses that He is merciful, gracious, steadfast in love, faithful, forgiving and yet just, not clearing the guilty.

The response of Moses to the words of God is to worship and to plead on behalf of His people. He even identifies Himself with His people. God responds by agreeing to make a covenant with the people and then He goes onto remind them of the things He had previously commanded them to observe. He does warn them too that He is a jealous God and in great detail warns them about not making any covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which they are going. He makes it very clear that He perceives such actions to be prostitution on the part of the people. This expresses the intimate nature of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. He especially warns them against making

cast idols as they had done with the golden calf, He reminds them of the festivals that they are to observe, the commands they are to keep, the sacrifices they are to offer to *YHWH*, and Moses writes everything down on the tablets.

When Moses comes down the mountain after His encounter with God His face is glowing and Aaron and the people are at first frightened, but then they come to Moses and He proclaims to the people the words of *YHWH*. The glowing of His face reinforces the words with a reminder of the divine presence. The face of Moses would be covered with a veil except when He was speaking to the people on behalf of God. In this chapter we see much about the nature, of God, of His personality given as a unique self-revelation from the mouth of God Himself. God challenges those that would follow Him to humble themselves in worship and humility as is fitting for human beings before God.

Questions

1. Do you think there is significance to the fact that the words of God are inscribed on stone tablets? If so, what is the significance?
2. Why do you think Moses is called to appear before God alone?
3. Why do you think God proclaims His name twice to Moses?
4. How important do you think what God reveals about Himself is for us today?
5. Why do you think God reveals these things about Himself?
6. Why do you think there is so much emphasis in the words of God on love and mercy?
7. Why do you think that God emphasizes that He does not forgive the guilty? What do you think this means for us today?
8. What do you think it means for Moses to worship God after He speaks to Him?
9. Why do you think Moses can be so bold in pleading for His people before God?
10. In verse 9 why do you think Moses identifies himself with the people in their sin?
11. What do you think it means to be taken as an inheritance by God?
12. Why do you think God now agrees to make a covenant with Israel when He had refused earlier?
13. At 34:11 why do you think God reminds Moses to “observe” what He commands?

14. Do you think the concerns of God about the people falling into idolatry have any meaning for us today? If so what meaning?
15. What do you think it means for God to tell Moses that His name is “Jealous?”
16. What do you think it means to make a covenant with someone? What are some of the ways that you think loyalty might be expressed in a covenant?
17. Why do you think breaking of the covenant is compared to prostitution?
18. Why do you think it is important to remind Israel to observe the festival of unleavened bread?
19. How important do you think observing the commandments of God are to demonstrating covenant loyalty to *YHWH*?
20. What are the things that God promises to Israel in this covenant?
21. How does this covenant differ from the covenant of Christians?
22. What do you make of the face of Moses glowing?
23. What do you think is the reason that Moses veils his face?
24. How important do you think the role of Moses is for the people of Israel?
25. What message should we take from this chapter to help us follow God more faithfully today?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that God seeks those who trust Him and understand who He is. In this chapter we see Moses boldly asking God for more understanding of who He is and interceding for His people, Israel. It is important to know that God is jealous and that He does not clear the guilty. Who then does He forgive? What is the most important lesson that you think we can take away from this chapter?

Where is God in these words?

In this chapter God reveals to Moses what He wants Moses to know about His nature. God reveals that He is compassionate, loving and merciful, but also that He is just. In revealing that He is jealous He reveals that the relationship that He had with Israel touched His deep passion. God passionately loves those that He chooses to enter into covenant with, such as with Israel. Why do you think God chooses to reveal intimate details about Himself to Moses?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

As we see how God shares His nature and heart with Moses we learn many things about God. Sometimes people can perhaps see their covenant with God as contractual in nature when they should see it as highly relational; something that is very personal and intimate in nature. How does knowing that God wants a deeply personal relationship with His people affect how you live your life as a disciple of Jesus?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God in this section is calling us to understand the nature of God more fully. When we build a relationship with people conversation is an important element of deepening and strengthening that relationship. God lets Moses know that an essential part of His nature is that He is jealous. God also tells Moses that He does not clear the guilty. This is an important part of the nature of God. What effect do you think that the words of God about not clearing the guilty, even in the midst of forgiving is expected to have upon the people of Israel?