

Exodus 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 34 The Lord said to Moses, Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke.

Be ready for the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain.

Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain. So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first, and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone.

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped. And he said, If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.

[1 : 29] And he said, Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their asherim. For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods.

You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib.

[2 : 47] For in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. All that open the womb are mine. All your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep, the firstborn of a donkey, you shall redeem with a lamb.

Or if you will not redeem it, you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem, and none shall appear before me empty-handed. Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.

In ploughing time, and in harvest you shall rest. You shall observe the feast of wheats, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God, the God of Israel.

For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders. No one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year. You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the sacrifice of the feast of the Passover remain until the morning.

The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. And the Lord said to Moses, Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.

[4 : 02] So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water, and he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone, because he had been talking with God.

Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him.

And Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining.

[5 : 07] And Moses would put the veil over his face again until he went in to speak with him. In Exodus chapter 34, there is a renewal of the broken covenant. And it's important to recognise that this isn't an alternative covenant.

It's a renewal of the covenant that has already been made. Many of the details that we have in the establishment of this covenant are exactly the same as we've seen earlier on. And the actual content of the covenant that is stipulated here is pretty much taken from the book of the covenant in chapters 21 to 23.

The Exodus, we must remember, was supposed to be a manifestation of God's name and his character. God reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush at the very beginning, revealing his name.

He proves his power and his glory over the Egyptians in the plagues. And he proves his character to Israel, bringing them out and taking them to himself in the event of the Exodus and Sinai.

The Lord makes himself known to Moses, as Moses is known himself to the Lord. He declares his mercy, his grace, his slowness to anger, his steadfast love and faithfulness, and his forgiveness and judgment as integral to who he is.

[6 : 19] These are attributes of God, but they're not just attributes. They are essential to God's nature. When we talk about God and his attributes, his attributes aren't something that's added to him.

They're not accidental to him. God doesn't just happen to be loving and merciful and gracious and compassionate. Those things are integral to who he is. They're integral to his divine nature.

Moses responds by bowing and worshipping the Lord and then requesting that God go up in the midst of them. But he gives a very strange rationale. Listen to what he says.

If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.

Now the strange thing about this rationale is we've seen this description of the people as a stiff-necked people earlier on in this particular account. In chapter 32, verse 9, And the Lord said to Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.

[7 : 23] Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them. And then later on in chapter 33, For the Lord had said to Moses, Say to the people of Israel, You are a stiff-necked people.

If for a single moment I should go up among you, I will consume you. Now the strange thing about it is that God previously gave the stiff-necked character of the people as an argument to destroy them, and then as an argument not to go up in their midst.

But here Moses presents the stiff-necked character of the people as an argument for God to go up in their midst. It's all very strange. Now I think we can be helped to understand this by looking back at the story of Noah.

As we've seen as we've gone through this passage, even from earlier on in the story of Sinai, the story of Noah is not far in the background. In chapter 8, verse 21, we read of Genesis, Now again,

the strange thing about that statement is we find something similar to it just a few chapters earlier. In chapter 6, verse 5, we read, Once again, a rationale for judgment at the beginning of the story becomes a rationale for grace at the end.

[9 : 01] How then are we to understand this? What is the logic of Moses' argument? Well, it seems as if the relationship between God and his people is being refounded on a somewhat diminished basis, a basis that takes account of and that makes accommodation for the deep flaws of the people.

The divine expectations placed upon the relationship seem to be lowered and also the expectations as a result placed upon the people are lowered. Once the flaws of the people are taken into account, the burden placed upon the relationship and the role of man within it is somewhat reduced. We should be clear, however, that there is loss here, that God wanted an intimacy with his people that just will not be possible with such a flawed and sinful people. Accommodation has to be made for their sin in a way that restricts the intimacy that God can enjoy with his people.

Moses concludes by asking for pardon for their iniquity and that God would take them as his inheritance. Let us be your legacy. Don't abandon us. That's the message that Moses is concerned to get across.

Looking back over these last few chapters, we've seen Moses interceding for the people, going through a number of different stages. First of all, calling God not to destroy them, that destroying them would not serve God's ends.

[10 : 19] Then judging the people in anger in order to express God's anger so that God would not judge them in his anger. Then aligning himself with the people so that the people would be saved by his association with them.

And then even beyond that, stepping outside of the people so that he could continue the relationship with God without the people being destroyed by his presence. And then seeking favour in God's sight and seeking the favour that God showed him to be given to the people.

And now here, pressing forward that final point, pleading with God to condescend to be near to a sinful and flawed people, recognising their frailty, their sin, but nonetheless going up in their midst, marking them out as his special possession and making his home among them.

This final request can be made on the basis of God's own self-revelation. He has revealed himself to be merciful and gracious, showing forgiveness and steadfast love and faithfulness.

After this, the covenant is reissued. And the new covenant statement is roughly patterned after the first four of the Ten Commandments and in terms of the commandments that we find within the Book of the Covenant in chapters 21 to 23.

[11 : 33] The first four commandments concerning having no other gods before the Lord, not making grave an image, not taking the name of the Lord in vain and remembering the Sabbath day.

And these roughly correspond to the case laws that are given within this particular section. What is underlined in this section is the way that the covenant is about a bond between God and his people. It's not just about moral laws or requirements. At the very heart of the covenant is a relationship between God and his people. And all the rituals, all the rites, everything else, the tabernacle, everything like that is designed for God to relate to and be near to his people.

And so at the very heart is faithfulness. God is a jealous God. God loves his people and he has a love that will not let go of his people. And for that reason, his people must be faithful to him.

They must not whore after other gods. They must not build idols. And there is the warning here against gods of cast metal, which of course refers back to the golden calf.

[12 : 37] The laws concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the firstborn of their sons refer to the events of the Passover. God has claimed his people for his own. They are his firstborn son. And for that reason, they need to give God his due.

This is a statement, I think, of the third commandment that we should not bear the name of the Lord in vain. God has placed his name upon the people. He has placed his claim upon the people as his own.

And they must honour that in their behaviour and their practice. And that, I believe, is at the very heart of what the third commandment means. The next section from verse 21 following refers to the law of the Sabbath.

This is the way in which they honour the Lord by remembering his great deeds of salvation, his deeds in creation, and give rest to their servants as he has given rest to them.

And this also expands out into festal occasions, not just the original Sabbath, but the feasts that extend that Sabbath principle. There aren't included in this section any of the commandments that really relate to the horizontal relationships of the people.

[13:42] And it's interesting we don't have the fifth commandment here. Rather, the commandments here underline the vertical relationship between God and his people, that very part of the relationship that has been compromised by the events with the golden calf.

This story ends on a very strange note. Indeed, in many ways, it ends with themes that are similar to where the story of the golden calf begins, with Moses being given the tablets after forty days and nights on the mountain, then descending with them to the people.

As Moses goes down the mountain, unbeknownst to him, his skin is shining. However, the word for shining is a strange one. It's related to the noun used for, for instance, the horns of the altar.

It's a word that could mean to grow horns. We've seen this actually within images. If you've ever seen Michelangelo's Moses, Michelangelo's Moses has strange things, horns growing out of his head like a bull.

Why is this wordplay here? Might there be some significance to it? I believe there is some significance to it. The story starts off with a golden calf designed to replace Moses after he has been on the mountain for forty days and forty nights and has not appeared.

[14:53] It ends with a shining bull, one who's shining as if he were golden, one who has, as it were, horns, and it's playing off the beginning of the story.

The golden calf was a replacement for Moses. It was designed to be a god or a power before the Lord that they could relate to instead of relating to the Lord. But now, Moses comes down from the mountain.

He comes down as one who is set up not as a calf but as a bull, one who has grown horns, one who's shining, one who's golden, as it were. The people were concerned about Moses the man and Moses the man seemed to be mortal and to have failed to have died in the presence of the Lord and so they wanted a sort of cast metal object to relate to, that they could relate to that and it would be a blast shield to protect them from the Lord.

But now, Moses comes down from the presence of the Lord shining, proof that he's been in the very presence of God himself and that he has survived. This is a god that a human being can relate to this is a god that mankind can come close to.

This is a god who is not far off, a god who is not distant but a god who wants to come near to and relate to his people. And so Moses the man is proof of something of the intent of the covenant.

[16:15] The intent of the covenant was always that God's people would come near to him, that they would relate to him, not relate to him from a distance behind blast shields of golden calves and other idols, protecting them from encounter with the divine?

No. The intent was that God would have fellowship with his people, that he would be their God and that they would be his people and that God would be close to them and that they would be close to him.

Aaron and the people respond once again but now they respond in fear to come close to Moses but Moses calls them near and he speaks to them and addresses them with God's word and after he has declared God's word to them he covers up his face with a veil.

Thereafter, when Moses spoke with the Lord, he would remove the veil, turn to the Lord and speak to him and once he had spoken to the Lord he would come down and speak to the people and then once he had finished speaking to the people he would put the veil upon his face again until he spoke to the Lord once more.

There might be some parallel here between the description at the very beginning of this story at the very last words of chapter 31. When God finished talking to Moses he gave him the tablets.

[17:29] When Moses finished talking to the people of Israel he put on the veil and there may be some similarity or some connection between the tablets and the veil. The tablets in some sense veil the face of God so that we can come close, that we can approach, that we can relate to him without being consumed or without being dazzled.

God revealed his glory to Moses but sheltered Moses in the cleft of the rock. In some ways the tablets of stone may be parts of the rock designed to protect us from the dazzling glory of God but yet to enable us to come close, to come into encounter with God.

In the same way the veil of Moses hid something about the true intent of the covenant, about the true destiny of the people of God, to come close to God in that way, in a way that will be transfiguring and yet it enabled people to have some relationship with that fact, some intimation of it, some inkling of what the covenant was all destined towards.

A question to consider. In 2 Corinthians chapter 3 Paul reflects and meditates upon the story of Moses and the veil.

How can the story of Moses and the veil help us to understand the purpose of the new covenant in Paul's understanding? ■■■■