

God's Covenant Renewed Once Again

Exodus 34

Last week we left Moses up on the mountain. He asked from God a huge thing: “Lord, show me your glory.” What a request! What an audacious prayer. Yet, Moses had found favor in God’s sight, and God granted his request with this condition: “You cannot look upon my face and live.”

So Moses was situated down in the cleft of a rock. God in some way covered Moses’ eyes as he passed by. Then Moses was allowed to see the trailing glory – the sum of all God’s perfections, as he passed by.

Now, it was time to move on. There were things for Moses, and for the people, to do. No matter how much we want to just stay on the mountaintop, God calls us to live out our faith in real-world situation. God begins by giving Moses some instructions:

I. Rewritten Tablets – Exodus 34:1-7

Did you notice the difference right away? Last time, God provided the tablets upon which would be written the Commandments. Now, Moses is to go out and cut two tablets from stone. Perhaps this is just a reminder of the consequences of the people breaking the law of God.

God also reminded Moses that the place to which he was going was holy, sacred, set aside. The reason is that this is the place where God would appear in all his glory and holiness. Now, only Moses was being summoned to meet with God, unlike before.

When Moses did as God commanded and had ascended up the mountain, the Scriptures say that God descended in the cloud. Here is a picture of God, who dwells in the highest heavens, condescending down to man.

We see this “accommodation” even more clearly and vividly in the God-man, Jesus. God, accommodating himself to take on human flesh that he might be the Mediator of a new covenant, that he might identify with those whom he came to save.

When God came down this time, it was not to reveal himself in appearance, but to describe his attributes – what he is like. This is such a striking choice of words given his holy response of judgment against the people because of their sin.

King David, who knew something about God’s discipline over his sin, camps on the same great revelation of who God is – **Psalm 103:1-14**

God begins with Moses by identifying himself by his covenant name, his salvation name – the LORD, meaning Yahweh. It was the name he revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

And notice the attributes he chooses to use in identifying himself: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness, a forgiving God. He forgives iniquity. The word is also translated “wickedness.” The word speaks of turning aside from what is good and right.

God forgives transgression. This is a stronger word; it is rebellion. John Mackay says this is “a willful violation of the terms of the covenant, involving not merely disobeying a rule or regulation, but betraying the relationship one has with the covenant King.” Remember that the whole setting of this experience at Mount Sinai is God making a covenant with his people. Covenant language runs through this whole narrative of God and Israel and Moses, of rules and regulations, of blessings and judgments.

Finally, God says he forgives sin. This is a more general term for moral failure. God forgives sin; is there any better news than that? This is part of God’s character.

Having said that, God also reminds Moses that he is a God of justice. The end of verse 7 reads: “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.”

This is an affirmation of the justice of God. One must never forget that God is first just, then merciful. Mercy is meaningless without justice. C. S. Lewis writes:

Mercy, detached from Justice, grows unmerciful. That is the important paradox. As there are plants which will flourish only in mountain soil, so it appears that Mercy will flower only when it grows in the crannies of the rock of Justice.

Mercy is the suspension of justice; it is the bypassing of the just penalty due the sinner because of the gracious and longsuffering love of God. But we must never assume that a delay in judgment means that God does not know, nor does not care, nor does not hold people accountable for sin. Justice must be served, but praise God, his mercy in Christ is abundant because of Jesus’ death on our behalf.

Moses is once again moved to prayer – **Exodus 34:8-9**

He asks again for God to go up with his people. It is not surprising that Moses is repetitive in his prayers. Don’t we do the same? We revisit God’s promises and ask repeatedly that he fulfill his word to us.

Moses also doesn't forget that he, too, is in need of a Savior. He speaks of "our iniquity" and "our sin." He was all too mindful that he was a sinner, much like the rest of the people.

God responds. And he once again renews the covenant he has made with Israel.

II. Renewed Covenant – Exodus 34:10-28

God promises that he is going to do a great thing with this people, an awesome thing that all the world will take note of. God doesn't restate all the laws, all the regulations that would govern the people. But it seems he focuses particularly on those things related to the proper worship of him.

He begins with a warning that they are not to make covenants with the inhabitants in the land into which they would be going. If they do, God says, they will soon find themselves worshipping their gods. The people are to be reminded that they already have a covenant – a covenant with God.

This God with whom they have a covenant has a name – a name that requires allegiance to him alone. That name is Jealous. Seems a little strange, doesn't it, to have the name Jealous? We understand jealousy in our experience and usage to mean resentful envy. I am jealous over your success. I am jealous when I see you spend time with someone else. I am jealous because you have a nice car, or home, or boat, or clothes, or friends that I don't have. And the list goes on.

But when applied to God, we aren't to see jealousy as resentful rivalry, but rather as fiercely protective. J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, writes:

God's jealousy is not a compound of frustration, envy, and spite, as human jealousy so often is, but appears instead as a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.

So, when God tells Moses that his name is Jealous, Packer writes:

He meant that He demands from those whom He has loved and redeemed utter and absolute loyalty, and will vindicate His claim by stern action against them if they betray His love by unfaithfulness.

The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of this action of God in the life of the believer. Turn over to the New Testament to Hebrews, chapter 12. Read **Hebrews 12:3-11**

God reminds Moses of the dangers of idolatry – of worshipping other gods and of worshipping him in the wrong way. He reiterates the Festivals that are part of their religious practice. These festivals would remind them of God’s character and how he might be approached and worshipped.

And then he tells Moses that this is the heart of his covenant with the people. Then it’s time for Moses to return to the people.

III. Recurring Glory – Exodus 34:29-35

There was something different about Moses after this last visit to the mountain – a visit where he saw God’s goodness in all its perfection, a visit where he spoke with God fact-to-face.

This would be a recurring experience: every time Moses went into to speak with God, in some way the very glory of God was reflected in Moses’ face. There was, if you will, some transference of the radiant glory of God’s presence to Moses countenance.

And it scared the people. Perhaps it scared Moses too. He would put a veil over his face after he relayed God’s message to the people. Then when he was in the presence of God, he would remove it.

Now this seems rather strange to us. If we are reading this and then trying to think, “How does this apply to me?” we might be scratching our heads. What are we to learn from this? What does this mean for us?

To answer those questions, we have to turn to the pages of the New Testament. The Apostle Paul draws on this experience of Moses to teach us a wonderful truth that applies to those who are believers in Jesus Christ. Turn over to the book of Second Corinthians, chapter three.

Let’s work our way through this passage and see Moses’ experience and ours in light of this teaching.

II Corinthians 3:1-11

Verses 7-11 are the heart of this chapter. Paul is giving insights into the Old Covenant, the Covenant of Law and the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace. Part of the glory in giving the Law was that Moses’ face reflected the glory of God.

Paul’s argument is that if there was glory in the giving of the Law which brought death, how much more glory is there in a ministry that brings life. In his letter to the Romans,

Paul describes the purpose of the Law. He says that “through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” It was the Law that revealed the holy perfection of God, the standard by which the people would be judged and the standard to which they should aspire.

In the book of Galatians, Paul says that the Law was like a tutor, a guardian, a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. The Law was never given to save an Israelite. Keeping the Law would never save anyone, a fact that the Pharisees in Paul’s day failed to comprehend. It simply shows us the standard and how far we fall short of that standard of God’s holiness. So the glory of the Law is really the glory of a ministry of death, resulting in condemnation.

The glory of the New Covenant, however, is a glory of righteousness. It produces a right standing before God and changes lives to the glory of God.

Now, look at the implications of this – **II Corinthians 3:12-18**

The glory that Moses experienced was a fading glory, not a permanent glory. The revelation that came to him was true, but it was not complete. Only in the face of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant is there full and complete revelation.

For the Jews in Jesus’ day, Paul says that the veil still remains in place. There is a spiritual veil over their hearts and minds. Their spiritual eyes were blinded so that when they read the Old Testament Scriptures, they did not see the truth about their own Messiah.

But, and here is the great power of the Gospel, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. And it is here, where the glory of God is beheld and God uses this revelation of glory to transform the life of the one who has placed their trust in Jesus.

Two results, consequences, or effects of having the veil of unbelief removed from us:

1) Freedom – Verse 17. Only the Spirit of God can bring about spiritual freedom. The Law can only bring bondage, but the Spirit introduces us into a life of liberty. Paul writes in Romans 8:15, speaking of the work of the Spirit:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

Those who turn to the Lord experience the most blessed spiritual liberty. The iron chains of guilt are removed. When that happens there is the ability, the capacity, to serve God and others. Such freedom is not license to do whatever you please. Rather, it is the power to do what pleases Christ. Paul writes to the Galatians:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. – *Galatians 5:13*

2) Transformation – II Corinthians 3:18

All of us who turn to the Lord are made free by the Spirit and by him we perceive the unveiled Christ of the Gospel. Unlike Moses, our faces are never veiled. The veil has been taken away. As Moses radiated God’s glory when his face was uncovered, so we reflect God’s glory. Look at the next chapter, verse six. – **II Corinthians 4:6**

Paul uses the same word to describe God’s glory being manifested in the believer’s life as that used to describe Jesus when he was “transfigured” on the mountain. God’s glory, veiled in human flesh, was unleashed; it was unveiled for just a short time.

This process of transformation is ongoing; it is progressive. It is a continuous experience of seeing Jesus, the exact image of God – radiant in glory. And as we do that, God changes our life – our vision, our outlook, our character, our countenance, our conduct. We are “under construction!”

When this process of transformation is taking place in our lives, one of the by-products is this: **II Corinthians 4:1**

We do not lose heart! Doesn’t mean we understand everything that is happening to us and around us. It doesn’t mean that we have a “pass” on hardship, disappointment, discouragement, grief. It means that everything has a context – that everything has ultimate meaning that sourced in Jesus Christ and God’s purpose for our lives, now and into eternity.

I go back to God’s revelation of his very character to Moses. This is the God who makes a covenant of grace with you when you place your faith in Jesus Christ and believe in his name and his work for you:

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.