

Exodus 34:5-9

⁵The LORD came down in the cloud. He took his stand there with Moses and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, ⁷maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin. He will by no means clear the guilty. He calls their children and their children’s children to account for the guilt of the fathers, even to the third and the fourth generation.”

⁸Moses quickly bowed to the ground and worshipped. ⁹He said, “If I have now found favor in your sight, Lord, please let the Lord go along with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our guilt and our sin, and accept us as your possession.”

The LORD

I.

The old man knelt in the dirt with a chisel and a hammer in his hands. He was just following instructions. Kneeling there in the dusty ground he had some time to think about the recent past. Kneeling there on the ground he was busily chiseling out some pieces of blank slate.

What had necessitated this work was his own action some days before. He had come down the mountain of God. Up on the mountain he had experienced the privilege of hearing from God himself what the people were to do and how they were to worship their God. But when he came down, he couldn’t believe his eyes. There were the people—people he had personally led out of Egypt—people who had seen the hand of God active in their own lives—but there they were, dancing around a calf made out of gold, worshiping it as if *it* were the god who had led the people Israel out of the land of Egypt with such power.

It had been enough to disgust him. In righteous anger, Moses had thrown down the tablets. Not just dropped them, but heaved them with force. The actions of the people dancing around the calf indicated their fickle nature. God’s commands to them might as well be nothing more than the tiny chunks of rock, broken on the path Moses had come down.

The people’s sin of idolatry was great. Yet Moses pleaded with the Lord to forgive them. The Lord told Moses to keep leading the people to the Promised Land. He said: “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey. But I myself will not go up among you, because you are a stiff-necked people, and I would consume you on the way” (Exodus 33:3, EHV).

Moses continued his pleas for the people day after day in the Tent of Meeting. Moses finally said: “If your Presence is not going to go with me, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶After all, how would people know that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Isn’t it in this way: that you go with us, so that we are distinguished, I and your people, from all the people who are on the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:15-16, EHV). God agreed he would go with Moses *and* the people.

That’s what led Moses to kneel in the dusty ground with his hammer and chisel. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Cut out two stone tablets like the first ones. On these tablets I will write the same words that were on the first tablets, which you broke’” (Exodus 34:1, EHV).

I wonder what Moses thought about while he went about his task. Did he think about the fickle nature of the people which he had witnessed in the recent past? Did he wonder how long their newly-renewed allegiance to the true God would last? Did he consider

endlessly what he would say to God when he went back up Mount Sinai to meet with God yet again?

II.

Pastors ever since Moses have undoubtedly wondered the same things. They present the truths of God's Word to people. Many listen. Some understand. Some *seem* to understand, and are filled with great zeal for the work of the Lord. But later they turn away to dance around the golden calves of their own making. They abandon the truths of God for the lies and myths of the current generation.

No doubt you have seen the same thing. You have watched fellow members walk away from the church. Maybe you've watched your children walk away—or at least become less attentive to their faith. It's heart wrenching when you know the truth.

You know what God says about himself in our text: "He will by no means clear the guilty. He calls their children and their children's children to account for the guilt of the fathers, even to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7, EHV). Those who despise God, who undervalue his goodness and mercy, bring on themselves God's wrath.

III.

It breaks your heart to watch people walk away because you know of God's great mercy. Moses had pleaded for the people. You and I plead in our prayers for those who don't believe.

"The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, ⁷maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7, EHV).

It is only a compassionate and gracious God who would invite Moses back up Mount Sinai after his chosen people had so completely turned away from him and his goodness. It is only a God who is slow to anger who could watch people commit the same sins against him in thought, word, and action time after time and want to have us turn back to him.

It is only a God overflowing with mercy and truth, who maintains that mercy for thousands, who would ever even *think* about sending his only-begotten Son to be the Savior from sin so that he could maintain his holiness and perfection and yet be able to forgive guilt and rebellion and sin.

This is the LORD. This is God's proper name, with all capital letters or small capital letters in the Bible. His very name means the God of full and faithful love. He is the "I AM" God, who does not change like the shifting shadows. He is the God who's love for us does not waver, even in the face of the evils we do every day.

This is the God who *did* send Jesus to be the Savior for all people. Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13, EHV). Elijah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist were names people gave—all great men, as far as it goes. But the reality is so much greater. Today Jesus is identified by many as a great Teacher or a great example or the founder of a new religion. None of these even come close to reality.

Jesus is the One who took the sins of the whole world on himself. He took the sins of the people of Israel who danced around the golden calf, and the sins of people today who create their own golden calves—their own false gods. All those sins he took as if they were his own and paid for them on the cross. As God himself, Jesus was abandoned by God to suffer the pain of hell itself for each one of those sins—each one of *your* sins.

That is the God overflowing with mercy and truth, as he described himself to Moses. A God who so overflowed with mercy that he poured out his very lifeblood for you and me.

That God so overflows with mercy that he calls to himself those *we* might see as abhorrent. Today's Second Reading was written by the Apostle Paul. At one time Paul had been called Saul, and was one of the greatest persecutors of Jesus Christ and his New Testament church. Paul marveled in the overflowing mercy God showed toward himself, noting that he, Paul, was the worst of sinners. God calls drug dealers and murderers to himself. God calls tax cheats and people who cheat on their spouses. God calls those we see as irredeemable in his grace and overflowing mercy.

IV.

After God identified himself to Moses as the Lord who is so compassionate and slow to anger and overflowing with mercy and truth, yet the God who also punishes those who turn away and reject his mercy, "Moses quickly bowed to the ground and worshipped" (Exodus 34:8, EHV).

We do the same. The God of Moses is the same God we gather week after week to worship. He knows our every weakness. He knows your sorrows, your concerns, your doubts, your challenges. He knows how easy it is for you to find your golden calves and turn away from him, at least for a time. His love and mercy never change. In his slow to anger nature, he keeps calling you back, again and again and again.

"[Moses] said, 'If I have now found favor in your sight, Lord, please let the Lord go along with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our guilt and our sin, and accept us as your possession'" (Exodus 34:9, EHV).

Note carefully Moses' attitude in his worship. He had pleaded with the Lord for these stiff-necked people. He had noted their fickle nature as they turned away from the true God. Yet as he worships the One true and only God, Moses says: "pardon *our* guilt and *our* sin." He lumps himself right in with the rest of the people as a fellow sinner.

God grant that none of us forgets that same attitude as we gather to worship the compassionate and gracious God who overflows with mercy and truth. When we look at the guilt and rebellion of sinners around us, it is important to note that, in God's eyes, *their* guilt and rebellion against God is no greater than our own. God *ought* to set aside his mercy and refuse forgiveness, but he does not. He gives it to us fully and freely.

Each week gather again to confess your sins to the God who overflows with mercy and truth, knowing that he has shown his mercy by sending Jesus for you. Amen.