

God's Sermon on His Name (Part 4)

Exodus 33:12 – 34:9

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Exodus 34. There is something, I think, in every human heart that longs to see justice done. It's part of the residual image of God. We know that God is a God of justice, and we therefore long for justice to be accomplished. But in our world we all understand that justice is often perverted. In the justice system, those with money, power or influence certainly try to subvert justice. And sadly, injustice happens as a daily occurrence around us in the normal venues of life, in government, in schools, in workplaces and even in families. If you doubt that, just ask yourself this question. How many times in your life have you either heard or said, "It's just not fair." Injustice is part of living in a fallen world. And if we're not careful, we can begin to think that God at times is willing to compromise His justice for us. Some, unfortunately, even begin to think of God as an indulgent grandfather who's out of touch, unaware, and from whom they can easily hide their sin.

God's self-revelation here in Exodus 34 destroys all of our inadequate, idolatrous views of God and replaces those things with a glimpse of His holiness, His greatness, His goodness, and as we will see today, His justice, the justice of the true and living God. This remarkable self-revelation comes in the aftermath of the golden-calf incident. That is the ominous backdrop, as we've seen. It was the sin of God's people in Exodus 32 and up through 33:11.

As Moses then seeks the forgiveness of God for his people, he makes three audacious requests. We looked at the end of chapter 33 at the prayer of the mediator, the one God had appointed to intercede on behalf of the people. Those requests—three of them. First of all, for the promise of God's presence: go with us. Secondly, for the knowledge of God's character: "Let me know

Your ways." And finally, for display of God's glory: "Show me Your glory." Those are audacious requests.

So on what grounds can God grant those? On what basis can Moses ask? And the answer is, the only grounds on which this can happen is the sovereign grace of God. That's why, in Exodus 33:19, God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious." And God determines that He will in fact be gracious to Moses. He will answer these requests.

And that brings us to chapter 34, the first 7 verses, which are God's gracious revelation, God's own explanation of His name. This self-revelation demonstrates how God responds to His people when they sin against Him, when they break the promises they've made to Him. So this passage could not be more appropriate than it is for any of us. Now here in Exodus 34:1-7, God teaches us several essential verities or truths about Himself. Let me just remind you of the ones we've seen so far.

First of all, God is holy. The first 4 verses tell us that when we sin, God doesn't bend His law, He doesn't compromise His moral stands. In fact, He tells Moses (in response to the people's sin) they had shattered God's Law. Moses shattered the tables, sort of as a symbol of that. And God says to Moses, if I'm going to restore My people to Myself, I need to write out My Law again: cut out two tables and bring them to Me, and I will write on them again. It shows the holiness of God. Secondly, we discovered that God is great. We saw it in His condescending to be with Moses. We saw it in His names that we examined together. Thirdly, we discovered last week that God is good. He is good in His attributes. That is, He is good in who He is: He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and truth (or faithfulness). And then we finished last time by looking at the fact that God is good in His actions; that is, in what He does.

Now, I noted for you that in verse 7 there are two distinct groups. There are, first of all, the thousands to whom God shows steadfast love and forgives their sin. And then there are the guilty whom He will not leave unpunished but visits their iniquity on the third and fourth

generation. Who are these groups? Well, we looked last time at two parallel passages that sort of give us insight into who these groups are. We looked at Exodus 20:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:9-10. And when you look at those passages, you discover that the two groups here in Exodus 34:7 can be defined, first of all, as “those who love Me.” That’s how they’re identified in those other passages: those who love Me. Who are those who love Him? Well again, when you reconstruct what is said in these three passages together, you can define it this way: they are the guilty who believe in Yahweh as their God; trust solely in His grace; repent of their sins; seek His forgiveness; and having found that forgiveness through His grace, they then love God and show their repentance and love by obedience to His Word. The second group is “those who hate Me.” These are guilty as well, but these are the guilty who remain unrepentant and demonstrate their hatred for God by continual disobedience and a refusal to turn from their sins and to plead for His grace and forgiveness.

Now, God acts very differently toward these two groups. (And by the way, as we noted last time, these are the only two groups. You are in one of these two groups. The question for you is which one?) To those who love Him, God’s actions are completely goodness. We saw that verse 7 says, to them He keeps steadfast love, and He does so “for thousands.” “Thousands” obviously means “many.” But when you compare it with the other texts we looked at, it also means “to the thousandth generation.” Now that’s not a promise that God is going to show His steadfast love by saving every descendant to the thousandth generation. That’s not true in Scripture. You see that with Abraham. Not every descendant of Abraham was a true believer, not every descendant of Isaac, not every descendant of Jacob, not every descendant of David. So it’s not saying every single person in every single generation; but rather, God will show His steadfast love on the godly person’s line to the thousandth generation. You and I still benefit from the promises made to Abraham.

Secondly, God’s actions are good in that He “forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.” When those who truly know God through the grace of God repent of their sins, God forgives. If, on the

other hand, those who know God through His grace refuse to repent (they get in a pattern of sin and get locked in that sin and refuse to turn), God will discipline them or chasten them as His children.

In fact, notice the next line in verse 7: “Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” We’re going to see that that applies primarily to those who hate Him, but it is used on a couple of occasions in the Old Testament to refer to those who love Him. In Jeremiah 30:11, God expresses this to Israel. He says, “I am with you... to save you; for I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, only I will not destroy you completely. [Listen to this.] But I will chasten you justly and will by no means leave you unpunished.” See how He connects this expression with His chastening or discipline of His own children, those who love Him. And of course, the same point is made in the New Testament. In Hebrews 12:3 and following, God says if you’re my son or My daughter, I’m going to discipline you like any good father would. So for us who know God through Jesus Christ, when there’s repentance, there is forgiveness, and if we refuse to repent for a time, then God will bring discipline and chastening into our lives.

But today, I want us to move on to this next expression here in verse 7 and consider how God responds to those who hate Him. And we discover in this a fourth essential verity about God. Not only is God holy, great and good, God is also just. He is just. Look at verse 7. “Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” Those in the first group get undeserved grace. Those in this second group, those who hate Him, get the justice they deserve.

Now God explains that His justice has two expressions here. Notice first of all, “Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” God will justly and certainly punish those who do not love Him for their sin. We saw this, remember, in Deuteronomy 7. Listen to how verse 10 puts it: “[God] repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him

who hates Him, He will repay him to his face.” Jeremiah uses this expression to describe those who are stubbornly unrepentant.

Now, God’s statement here in verse 7 about Himself means that He always is and He always acts in perfect, unwavering justice. This is the testimony of Scripture. If you go back to Genesis 18:25, you remember what Abraham said to God? He said God, far be it from You that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. “Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” That is, deal in justice. Deuteronomy 32:4, Moses, in his great song, says this of God: “His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice.” In Job 34:12, “Surely... the Almighty will not pervert justice.” Psalm 89:14, “Justice,[O God, is] the foundation of Your throne.” In other words, justice is the base on which God’s rule is built.

Now when the Bible says God is just, it means two things. First of all, it means that as the perfect lawgiver, He has given us His Law. And secondly, it means that as the perfect judge, He measures us, each one of us, against that Law and gives us what we deserve. He is just.

Now, there’s a massive problem with the justice of God. We want God, in one sense, to be just, just not just with us. Because God is just—understand this—not one sin escapes God’s notice. Have you ever thought about this? Let this drill into your soul, because this is the testimony of Scripture. Not a single sin committed on this planet escapes the notice of God. God knows every sinful act, even the one we do our best to hide. Psalm 90:8, “You have placed our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the [blazing] light of Your presence.” Nothing, nothing is hidden to God. God knows every sinful habit. Proverbs 5:21, “The ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths.” The Hebrew word for “paths” is a reference to a person’s lifestyle, to their patterns of behavior, to their habits. God knows every sinful word. Matthew 12:36, “Every careless word [singular] that people speak, [Jesus says] they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.” For every single, careless or sinful word.

But most unsettling of all, I think, is that God knows our every thought and motive. See, we can look pretty good to everybody else. Other people may look at us and think of us a way that's totally different in the way God knows us. But here's the troubling reality. Hebrews 4:12-13 says,

The word of God is living and active... sharper than any two-edged sword... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart... [How can it do that?] there is no creature hidden from [God's] sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Think about this with me for a moment. From the day you were born, God has witnessed every single time you have sinned. He has heard every sinful or careless word that has ever left your mouth. He fully knows every sinful thought, such as lust or anger or bitterness or jealousy, that you have ever entertained. And in the mind of God, in the perfect, omniscient mind of God, there is a perfect record of every single sin every single sinner has ever committed. In fact, in Revelation 20 it's described as the books in heaven being opened; that is, the divine record of the deeds of men and women.

If you've not repented and believed in Christ, that same passage, Revelation 20, says that you will stand before what John the Apostle calls the Great White Throne of Judgment. And in that judgment, the books will be opened. That is figurative of the divine omniscience, the all-knowing mind of God that has captured every single, sinful thought and word and action. And God will use that complete record to judge you when you stand before Him. Not one single sin will go unpunished. God will punish every single violation of His righteous Law. That's what it means when it says, "Yet He will by no means [clear] the guilty." Exodus 23:7 says, "I will not acquit the guilty." Ecclesiastes 12:14, "God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden whether it is good or evil." Jeremiah 32:19, "[The Lord's] eyes are open to all the

ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.” And as it’s expressed here in verse 7, “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” God says that His justice, which is His very nature, demands that He punish every single sin without exception. It’s coming. There was a famous Southern Baptist evangelist who preached a famous message with the title “Payday Someday.” Payday someday.

Now, what I’ve said so far might leave some people, maybe even you, to think, “Wow, that really sounds unloving. How could a loving God respond to sin and sinners like that?” You don’t really believe that God is unloving to be just. And let me explain why you don’t really believe that. What if I told you that down at the courthouse in Tarrant County there was a human judge who had a reputation for being so loving that every criminal who appeared in his court he forgave them and dismissed their case and let them go. Every murderer, every rapist, every child abuser, every person who committed a horrible act of crime, that judge, because he was so loving, just forgave them and let them go. What would you say? Now be honest with yourself. You would not say, “O, that’s so wonderful. That judge is just so loving.” No! There is within you the residual image of God which says, “That’s not loving! That’s a perversion of justice!” How much more, God says, would that be true if I did the same thing? You see, if God isn’t just, then He’s not God. Justice is the foundation of His throne. That means somebody’s going to pay for every sin *you* have ever committed. Every single one of them. It will either be you for eternity, or it’ll be Jesus Christ, the One whom God has appointed to be able to stand in your place. But somebody is going to pay for every single sin ever committed on this planet. The justice of God demands it. “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”

There’s a second expression of God’s justice in verse 7 there in Exodus 34. “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of [the] fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” Now this passage is often grossly misunderstood. First of all, let’s look at the word “visiting.” The Hebrew word means “to carefully investigate and respond based on what you find.” That’s what it means “to visit.”

Sometimes it's positive. God visits His people and finds them in desperate physical condition, and He does them good. He gives them food, for example. Ruth 1 talks about that. God visited His people and gave them food. But most of the time it's used in this sort of context: God carefully investigates and responds based on what He finds. So don't misunderstand. Listen carefully. God never punishes children for the sins of their fathers. Deuteronomy 24:16, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin." That's the Law of God.

Turn to the Book of Ezekiel. The Prophet Ezekiel, in chapter 18, lays out this principle for an entire chapter. We won't look at all of it, but let me just call your attention to the first 4 verses. Ezekiel 18:1:

Then the word of the Lord came to me [Ezekiel the prophet], saying, "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes [in other words, the fathers sinned], but the children's teeth are set on edge'? [The children face the bitterness of the sin of the fathers. They are the ones who get the penalty.] As I live," declares the Lord God, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die."

God says it is a basic principle of My justice to deal with each person based on their own choices. (Now keep your finger there; we're going to come back to this chapter in just a moment.)

That means that back in Exodus 34:7 when it says "visiting the iniquity of [the] fathers on the children," it doesn't mean punishing the children for the father's sins. Instead, it's talking about the powerful influence of sin. If the fathers hate God, then often the children hate Him through

the influence of their parents. And if God visits or if God investigates and finds that to be true, then He will judge and punish the children, not for the parent's sin, but for their own sin.

But notice that by God's grace, this pattern of influence, it doesn't extend to the thousandth generation like it does with His steadfast love. Rather, it extends at the most to the fourth generation. And listen carefully. By God's grace, the pattern can be and often is broken. Look again at Ezekiel 18:21. "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed." That's repentance. And how do you show that repentance? "[By observing] all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live." Where there is repentance and faith in God, that person enjoys life. "He shall not die." I think the reference here is both to not being put to death physically in Israel, but also to he will not die permanently, spiritually. He will not face all that's involved in eternal death.

"All his transgressions which he as committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he... practiced, he will live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord God, "rather... that he should [here it is] turn from his ways [repent] and live?"

It happens. You see, this pattern can be broken. Many of you in this room are a testimony to the fact that this pattern can be broken. Maybe you're a first-generation Christian, you're from the home of those who did not love God, who did not obey His commands, and God simply reached down into that and snatched you to Himself from a long line of sinners. Just like He did with Rahab in the Old Testament and with Ruth and with Naaman the leper and with Nebuchadnezzar. Folks, don't ever lose hope. In God's great grace, this pattern of influence can be broken.

Now go back to Exodus. And I want you to see that both groups in verse 7 are guilty of iniquity, but God forgives one group, and He punishes the other. So what determines how you get into the first group? Well, there are two answers to that question.

First of all, there's the answer from God's perspective. Go back to 33:19. "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." In other words, one answer to how you get into the first group, from God's perspective, it's because He in sovereign grace determines to show grace. God says, the exercise of My attributes that I'm going to proclaim to you, Moses, depends entirely on My own will. My decision to act according to these virtues is solely at My discretion. Or if I could put it this way: God says, I will be gracious if it pleases Me, when it pleases Me, for reasons that please Me, and to whom it pleases Me. In Romans 9, Paul quotes this very verse in reference to election.

But there's a second answer to this question of how you get into that first group that God forgives sins. And this is the one you need to worry about, if this is true of you. It's the answer from our perspective. There are a lot of places I could turn, but I love the way Isaiah puts it in Isaiah 55:6-7. Here's how you get into group one if you're not there, if you've not been forgiven:

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts
[In other words, repent, turn from your rebellion, turn from your sin.];
And let him return to the Lord [There's faith: repent and believe.],
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

That's how you get into group one. Call upon Him. Seek Him. Repent and believe, and He will abundantly pardon.

Now I want you to look again at verse 7, because in verse 7 is the great enigma of the Old Testament. Do you see it? Look at the first half of the verse. God leaves some of the guilty unpunished and forgives their iniquity, transgression and sin. And then He says, “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” It’s like, wait a minute. How can both of those statements be true? The solution to this great enigma is announced in the Old Testament. You see, we learn in Isaiah—I want you to turn there with me, Isaiah 53. We learn some 700 years before Christ exactly how this was going to happen, how this enigma could be answered. God would appoint a special Servant who would represent His people. And God would impute or credit to that Servant the sins of believers, and He would punish the Servant in their place. Look at Isaiah 53:4:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,

And our sorrows He carried;

Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,

Smitten of God, and afflicted.

[Notice verse 5.]

But He was pierced through for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities [And notice it’s plural: our iniquities, our individual sins.];

The chastening for our well-being [or our shalom] fell upon Him,

And by His scourging we are [spiritually] healed.

All of us like sheep have gone astray,

Each of us has turned to his own way;

But the Lord has caused [the guilt] the iniquity of us all

To fall on Him.

Verse 8, notice the second half of the verse: “He was cut off out of the land of living.” He died. Why? “For the transgression of My people, to whom the stroke was due?” Even though verse 9 says He Himself was perfectly, morally pure: “He had done no violence... there [was no] deceit in His mouth.” “But the Lord was pleased to crush Him [verse 10], putting Him to grief; [and here’s the key] if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” In other words, He would be the sacrifice bearing the sins of His people. Verse 11 says, “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.” You see, God credited the sins of believers to the Servant and punished Him in their place. And then, verse 11 says, He takes the righteousness of His Servant and He credits that to those He represented. That’s the promise made in the Old Testament.

Now don’t forget who was speaking with Moses back in Exodus 34. It’s the eternal Son of God. It’s the second member of the Trinity. And it was He who would become the special Servant. In other words, He is the solution to the great enigma of the Old Testament. The riddle of the Old Testament is answered in a person. How God could forgive iniquity, transgression and sin, and yet not leave a single sin unpunished, it’s because of Christ.

Turn over to John 1. You’re familiar with this passage. “The [Eternal] Word [verse 14] became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, [Notice this next expression. He was] full of grace and truth.” You know where that comes from? Exodus 34:7. He was full of steadfast love and truth (or faithfulness). And look down at verse 17. “The law was given through Moses; [but steadfast love and faithfulness] were realized through Jesus Christ.” He’s the One who made it possible for God to express those things to us. How? Well, He said it Himself, didn’t He? In Mark 10:45, I’ve come to save by giving My life as a ransom in the place of many. First Peter 2:24, “He Himself bore our sins [plural] in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness... by His wounds you were healed.”

So folks, God is holy, He's great, He's good and He's just. And that leads—very briefly—to the obvious response: the exaltation of God's person. We see it in verses 8-9 of our text. First of all, there's humility and submission. Verse 8 says, "Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth." That is his humility before God, and it shows his submissiveness to God. "And worship." And he worshiped God. And prayer. Verse 9, He said, "If [I have now] found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray." You see, Moses used what he'd just learned about the character of God to pray to God, to argue with God. He asked God for the continued presence of God with them: "Let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate." He asked God for the forgiveness of sin: "Pardon our iniquity and our sin." And for the Lord's complete acceptance: "And take us as Your own possession." How could he ask those things? On the basis of what he'd just learned about God.

Listen, a just and holy God has witnessed every sin you have ever committed. He has a perfect record in His divine mind, and He is bound by His unchanging character to punish every single sin without exception. But here's the good news. That offended God, for all of those who will believe in His Son, He took the pages of that record that represent every single sin you've ever committed, and He tore it from the divine record. And Colossians 2 says He nailed it to the cross as the accusation against Christ. And Christ died on that cross to pay your debt for every single sin. Because God is just, not one sin in the history of the universe will ever go unpunished. The unrepentant? If you simply refuse to take God's offer of grace in Christ, then you will pay for your sin forever. But praise God! For us who are in Christ, all of our sins were paid in full. The debt was paid. And that is why communion is a celebration. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are amazed at Your eternal plan of redemption. Lord, thank You for what it cost You, for what You were willing to pay to solve the riddle, the enigma of the Old Testament, which is really the enigma of Your own character, that You are at one both the forgiving God, and yet the God who will leave no sin unpunished. Lord, we thank You that at the cross Your justice and Your grace met in the person of Jesus Christ; and that on the cross you credited the sins of

everyone who would ever believe in Him to His record; and for those six dark hours You treated Him as if He had committed every single sin that every single believer has ever committed, so that You could forgive us. Lord, we thank You for such grace, and we thank You for this opportunity to celebrate that grace in the Lord's Table.

And Lord, as we prepare our hearts now, we ask that You would forgive our sins. Lord, I pray that You would cleanse us, each of us individually, as we confess our sins to You. Lord, we have been forgiven at the moment of salvation. We have been forgiven as criminals before the throne of Your justice. Once and forever we are justified. And yet, Father, as we walk through this world, we gather the dust of the world on our feet, and we need to have our feet washed, as Jesus described it. That's what we come today asking You to do. We've already been bathed, but we need our feet to be washed. Cleanse us, O God. Enable us to take of the Lord's Table in a way that honors His sacrifice.

Take a moment now and prepare your heart as the men come.