

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Exodus 33:12-34:9 “The Glorious Attributes of God”

Intro. In this context Israel had messed up big time. They had broken the covenant. They had made an idol, and yielded to other vile temptations. God was ready to destroy the nation and raise up a new nation from Moses. Moses himself must have wanted to throw in the towel and just quit! But instead, he interceded for Israel, and God agreed to spare the lives of His people and allow them to continue on to the Promised Land. However, God said He would no longer be in the midst of the people, lest He destroy them along the way. He knew they were stiff-necked, and prone to evil. So He said He would send His angel to lead them, and be with them.

That did not satisfy Moses. He did not want to go up without *God's* presence. Moses knew that he could not make it on his own. He didn't want a mere angel to accompany them, for there was nothing special about that. After all, the thing that distinguished Israel from the other nations was that *their* God was *present* with them. So he intercedes yet again for His people. Moses reminded the Lord of His promise to accompany the people on their journey (3:12). Surely God was not going to go back on His Word! He also made appeal based on the mercy and grace of God (v.12). As a result, God did say to Moses in v.14, “My Presence will go with you,¹ and I will give you rest.” Even that promise did not fully satisfy Moses. He continued to plead for God's personal presence among the people. Again in v.17 God assured Moses saying, “I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.”

Moses is still not *fully* satisfied. Based on his request in v.18, it's as if he wants God to shake hands on the deal, or give some sign that He will go with His people. He wanted some confirmation that God would do what He has promised. So he says in v.18, “Please, show me Your glory.” They had seen the glory of God before, once after the people had complained against the Lord (16:7-10), and again on Mount Sinai after they had ratified the covenant (24:9-17). Moses felt that if the Lord revealed His glory once again, it would be a positive sign that He had reaffirmed the covenant and it would also be a visible sign of His presence, which he so greatly desired. Besides, a personal encounter with God is better than verbal communication alone. That is one reason why God manifested Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.² This is like the difference between seeing a picture of someone and meeting them in person.

God once again graciously agrees to do what Moses is asking.³ I believe this illustrates that God responds to intercessory prayer. But God's response is very interesting. Notice what He says in v.19, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you....” Instead of just revealing a visible manifestation of God's radiant glory, He

¹ In this verse “you” is singular. God promises with presence with Moses, but He still seems hesitant about granting His presence with the nation. Perhaps that is why Moses continues to intercede for God's presence with “us” in the next verse.

² John 1:14 says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

³ At the close of our book, we find another fulfillment of this. After Moses had erected the tabernacle, the visible symbol of the Lord's presence descended and filled it, and we read, “For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys” (40:38).

also promises to reveal His character, His attributes, His way of dealing with us. Actually, there is a clear connection between God's glory and His attributes. The character qualities of God are indeed glorious, and worthy of praise.⁴

So this morning we are going to get a glimpse of the glory of God and consider some of the key attributes of God. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." One reason we sin is because we do not really know God. The better we know Him, the more like Him we can become (2 Cor. 3:18). The better we know Him, the more we will come to Him to meet our needs. Knowing God should be the desire of every believer. In fact, Paul said in Phil. 3:10, "That I may know him...." Philip said to Jesus in John 14:8, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." So let's look into our text and get to know the one true God better. I will also seek to apply each truth about God to our personal lives. I encourage you to jot down these five main attributes.

So what is God like? First of all, I want you to understand that:

I. GOD IS AWESOME

None can compare to the Lord our God. His purity and power are so great that no sinful man can look directly into the face of God. Notice what God says in vv.20-23, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."⁵ And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen." Again, God is so great and awesome no mortal man in sinful human flesh can look directly upon God and live. If you could look directly at the glory of the sun for a minute you would go blind. So instead, God shelters Moses in the cleft of a rock as He passes by, and God only allows Moses to see His "back." This does not necessarily mean that God appears to Moses in bodily form and that Moses sees what looks like a man's back. It's possible that to see God's back means to only see where He has been. God's appearance is a mystery, a mystery that even Moses himself is able to see only partially. Can you imagine what it was like to be with such an awesome God, up close and personal?

One purpose of this appearance of God was to draw more clearly the parallel between Moses' commission in chapter 3 and his "recommission" here in chapter 33. It is also a boost of God's presence for the task that lies ahead. Indeed, sometimes we need to recharge our spiritual batteries and rekindle the old flames of excitement and passion for the Lord. Having a fresh experience with God will do just that. After this mountain top experience, Moses was never the same. We read later that even his face radiated with the glory of God (34:29). It appears that no one can experience an encounter with the Lord and remain the same.

I believe that we should pray that God will manifest His glory among us. We should pray for a fresh touch from God. I have been serving God for over 45 years. I need a fresh touch from God to continue serving Him.

⁴ Furthermore, there is a close connection between the name of God and His attributes. The names of God convey what He is like, and what He will do for us.

⁵ In v.11 we read, "So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." The difference is contact by voice rather than by sight.

Now since God is awesome, we also need to do what Moses did when he encountered God. We read in 34:8, “So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.” We also need to fear or respect Him.

I am glad that this is not the only attribute of God. We are no match for such a powerful, awesome God who can consume us as quickly as hair is consumed before a flame. So I have good news. Another attribute of God revealed in this text is:

II. GOD IS GOOD AND GRACIOUS

Notice in v.19 that God says, “I will make all My goodness [*tuwb*] pass before you....” Often the word translated “goodness” conveys the idea of good possessions or provisions for our needs.⁶ Psalm 31:19 says, “Oh, how great is Your goodness, Which You have laid up for those who fear You....”⁷ Furthermore, in the last of v.7 God says that He is “abounding in goodness.” Actually, a different Hebrew word is used here. It is *cheched*, often translated “loving-kindness.” Clearly this text teaches that God is a God of love, and thus good and gracious. When God uses the word “abounding,” He wants us to understand that the resources of His love and goodness are not limited, but boundless.⁸

Golfer Arnold Palmer once played a series of exhibition matches in Saudi Arabia. The king was so impressed that he proposed to give Palmer a gift. Palmer objected, “It really isn’t necessary, Your Highness. I’m honored to have been invited.” The king replied, “I would be deeply upset if you would not allow me to give you a gift.” Palmer thought for a moment and said, “All right. How about a golf club? That would be a beautiful memento of my visit to your country.” The next day, delivered to Palmer’s hotel was the title to a golf club; thousands of acres, trees, lakes, clubhouse, and so forth.⁹ If an earthly king could bestow such bountiful goodness, how much more will our Heavenly King bestow goodness upon those who seek Him in believing prayer?

Now let’s look over to chapter 34 and see the actual fulfillment of God’s promise to reveal His Glory. There we see one aspect of His goodness in vv.6-7, “And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.’” Notice in v.6 that God proclaims that He is “gracious, ... abounding in goodness.” Because God is good, He is also gracious. This tells us the ground on which God bestows His goodness: it is not for anything in man or from him, but solely because of His own goodness. The reason He brought Israel out of Egypt in the first place is because He is gracious.

This ought to affect how we view God and how we pray. When you pray, praise God for His graciousness. And when you offer your petitions to Him, be encouraged that you are asking a God who is full of goodness and loving-kindness to meet our every need. His resources are abundant. This should encourage our hearts as we see to petition Him in prayer.

⁶ Genesis 24:10; 45:18-23; Dt. 6:11; 2 Kings 8:9; Ezra 9:12; Nehemiah 9:25-36; Isaiah 1:19; Jer. 2:7; 31:12-14.

⁷ Psalm 65:4 says, “We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, of Your holy temple.”

⁸ The two words are also put together in Isaiah 63:7, which mentions “the great goodness [of God] toward the house of Israel, which He has bestowed on them according to His mercies, according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses [*cheched*].”

⁹ Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 165.

III. GOD IS RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY

This truth about God is presented several times in the book of Exodus. When God first appeared to Moses, He said in 3:5, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” The fact that God is holy means that He is separate from sin (cf. 34:3) and He is to be regarded as special. After God gave the great deliverance and victory through the Red Sea, they sang to the Lord in 15:11, “Who is like You, glorious in holiness....” He never sins. He always does what is right.

Because God is righteous and holy, He judges sin. Back in 33:3 God said, “I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” When you see God’s 3-fold description of sin in v.7, you see why He judges sin. He speaks of “iniquity and transgression and sin.” Iniquity describes sin as something twisted and contrary to the righteous standard. “Transgression” (*pasha*) is literally apostasy or rebellion, a willful crossing of the forbidden line. “Sin” is missing the mark, a failure in measuring up. We may make light of sin, but here we see that sin against a loving and holy God is serious business. Therefore, He says in the last of 34:7 that He will by no means clear the guilty, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” We live in a moral universe. Though it seems there are times when people are getting by with their sin, by in large we see evidence all about us that when you do wrong, you will suffer the consequences. Moses later said in Num. 32:23, “be sure your sin will find you out.” And here in my text we see that the consequences of sin can be serious, not only for yourself, but also for your children and other descendants. Again, the last of v.7 says, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” Both through genetics and by our example, we can contribute to causing our children to follow in our sinful ways.¹⁰ And when they do, they will suffer the consequences.

For example, in many Muslim countries generation after generation are being brought up to live in hatred toward the Jews and other so-called “infidels,” and even commit murder. Those who hate and kill are under the judgment of God.

Listen, sin may cause you little pain now, but it could sting in a most tender area of your life later—when you see your sin and its terrible consequences manifested in your children and grandchildren. For parents who love their children this is one of the most sobering texts in all of the Bible. So we need to be careful about treating sin casually. In light of the holiness of God and the serious consequences of sin, both for us and others, we should repent of sin, and turn from it.

Now the fact that God is holy, and judges sin is bad news for sinners. But I have good news. Even though God is righteous and judges sin, it is great to know that:

IV. GOD IS MERCIFUL

The first attribute of God mentioned in 34:6 is His mercy. Mercy is the wondrous provision of God to meet the desperate needs of a people who have disobeyed Him and failed to respond to His grace. He does not want to judge people; He wants to save people. So from Egypt to Sinai God had dealt with Israel on the ground of pure grace. In themselves they were no better than the Egyptians. But how had the people responded to such favors and blessings? They had

¹⁰ However, Ezekiel 18:19 teaches that any child that turns from the sinful ways of his father and obeys God will not be punished for the sins of his father.

repudiated Him, they had set up an idol in His place! The Divine outflow of grace had been abused, His righteous law had been broken, and His covenant had been disrupted by the rebellion of Israel. Now, only by the exercise of God's great mercy could sinning Israel be extricated from their merited doom.

Mercy was the hope of David when he had sinned so grievously: he said, "Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great" (2 Samuel 24:14). Jonah had this attribute and this Scripture in mind when he said in Jonah 4:2, "I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." Though Nineveh was a wicked nation, God was willing to hold back judgment when they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

All of us have messed up, perhaps only recently. All of us deserve to suffer the consequences of our sin both in this life, and in eternity. But there is hope for the sinner. Look to the mercy of God! Have you come to understand and apprehend this glorious attribute of mercy in which our God is so "rich" (Eph. 2:4)? Notice in v.7 that God is "keeping" mercy for thousands. He is preserving some mercy just for you.

Perhaps mercy is mentioned first in v.6 because it is the basis of other attributes of God. I believe at least three of the attributes of God mentioned here relate to His merciful nature:

A. God Is Compassionate – God says in v.19, "I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." He looks upon a human race that is suffering for their sin, and He is moved with compassion. God is a compassionate God.

This attribute of God is demonstrated many times in the life of Jesus. For example, we read in Matthew 14:14, "And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick."

May God help us to be compassionate toward the suffering, even those who are suffering the consequences of their own sin.

Because God is merciful, we also see from our text that:

B. God Is Longsuffering – God affirms that in v.6. The word longsuffering signifies "slow to anger." Paul said in 1 Cor. 13:4 that love is longsuffering, slow to anger. God holds back His wrath by the reigns of His love. He is extraordinarily patient.

How strikingly did the whole history of Israel bear witness to the wondrous patience of God! They had been unbelieving at the Red Sea. They had grumbled against God in the wilderness. Then, this rebellion with the golden cow should have ended God's patience. Three strikes and you're out! Enough with this stiff-necked people! But instead, the mercy and compassion of God restrained His wrath.

I'm glad that God is slow to anger, aren't you? Pastor and author John Piper said, "If rockets of wrath shot out from God's eyes every time I sinned, I would be blown to smithereens before I got out of bed in the morning."

One reason God is slow to anger is to give us time to repent and receive forgiveness of sin. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." And so that leads to another wonderful attribute of God that flows from His love and mercy:

C. God Is Forgiving – God says in v.7, “keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” The word translated “forgive” literally means “to lift up, take away, carry off.” God is willing to take your sin away. I was the one who deserved to die on the cross, but Jesus bore my sin on the cross, and carried it away for me! Do you remember what John the Baptist said in Jn. 1:29, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Now this brings up what may appear to be a contradiction. The problem is: How can God on the one hand forgive the guilty and yet, according to v.7 He affirms that He will by no means clear the guilty? This demonstrates that God does not extend mercy by shutting His eyes to the guilty or by saying, “I will just forget that sin.” Sin must be punished and a penalty must be paid. So how does He extend mercy and forgiveness, and yet judge iniquity at the same time? The answer is pictured in the sacrifices of the tabernacle. The sacrifices Israel made in that day did not take away sin but they pointed to that “Perfect Sacrifice,” the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the atonement of Jesus Christ, He bore our guilt and paid the penalty of our sin. So God can forgive sin based on the fact that sin has indeed been punished.

I am so thankful that the blood of Jesus Christ covers my sin, and protects me from the wrath of God. I see this pictured in vv.21-22 of chapter 33. God promised that as He passed by in all of His glory, including the glory of His holiness and righteousness, He would put Moses in the cleft of the rock and cover him with His hand. There Moses would be safe from being consumed by the wrath of a righteous God. I believe this could be the basis of the familiar hymn, “Rock of Ages.” It goes like this, “Rock of Ages cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee. Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure, Save from wrath and make me pure.”

Another way to resolve the problem of v.7 is to consider this: Forgiveness is for the *repentant*. The refusal of forgiveness is only for the unrepentant. If you spurn His offer of mercy, He will by no means clear you of your guilt. But if you repent of your sin and receive forgiveness by faith in Jesus, the guilt is gone.¹¹

Have you applied this glorious truth? Have you looked to the Lord for forgiveness? Don't every think you are too far gone to be forgiven. If God gives you a desire to be forgiven, you certainly can be. He will not only forgive you, but also restore you to His favor.

Finally, one other glorious attribute of God is this:

V. GOD IS TRUTH

Noticed in the last of v.6 that God is “abounding in ... truth.” I believe the main point in mentioning this attribute in this context is to assure Moses that since He abounds in truth, we can count on Him to keep the promises He has made. In fact, the Hebrew word (*emeth*) signifies “steadfastness, faithfulness, reliability.”

The fact that God is truthful and faithful to His Word is seen in the fact that He is a covenant-keeping God. Right in this context He reaffirms His covenant with Israel. In 34:1 God instructs Moses to “cut two tablets of stone like the first ones.” God pledged to give His 10 Commandments to Moses and Israel yet again. Also, He specifically said in v.10, “Behold, I

¹¹ In v.9 we see that Moses applied this truth to himself and Israel. He said, “If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance.” Sure enough, because God is merciful and forgiving, and since they did show signs of sorrow over their sin (33:5-6), He did forgive and He kept His presence with the people.

make a covenant.”¹² God is faithful to His covenant, true to both His promises¹³ and His threatenings.

As I have become older, death no longer seems to be a distant possibility but something I could face sooner than I would like. Yet knowing these attributes of God gives me confidence that since I have repented of my sins and put my faith in Jesus, and since God is true to His Word, I can even anticipate with joy what will follow death: eternal life in heaven. This is not wishful thinking but the sure and true word of Christ who conquered death.

God promises to forgive you of your sin if you repent and ask Him to forgive you. Will you claim His sure promises? He promises that He will bestow His goodness if you look to Him by faith, and walk with Him. Will you claim His sure promises? Because God is true and faithful to His Word, you can count on God to do what He says He will do. But remember this: His warnings of judgment are also true.

Conclusion: I believe that Moses was changed as he beheld the glory of God, and got to know God better. Look over to 34:29, “Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses’ hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.” The same thing can happen to us if we gain a good understanding of who God really is, and as we abide in His presence through prayer and worship. You can become loving like God, righteous like God, merciful like God, slow to anger like God, forgiving like God, and faithful like God. The first step is to repent of your sin, trust in the mercy and forgiveness of God. Jesus died for your sin. Then, you need to begin to walk with God and get to know Him better by reading His Word and through prayer. Let us become true children of God, and become like our Heavenly Father.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Alan Carr, www.sermonnotebook.org; Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2008; Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981), except 34:8-9; Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); John Piper, www.desiringgod.org; Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

¹² I also want to point out that the verb “pass” is used of two parties passing between the sacrifice to ratify a covenant (Gen. 15:17-18; cf. Lev. 18:21).

¹³ This is the meaning in Genesis 24:27; 32:10; Joshua 2:14; etc.