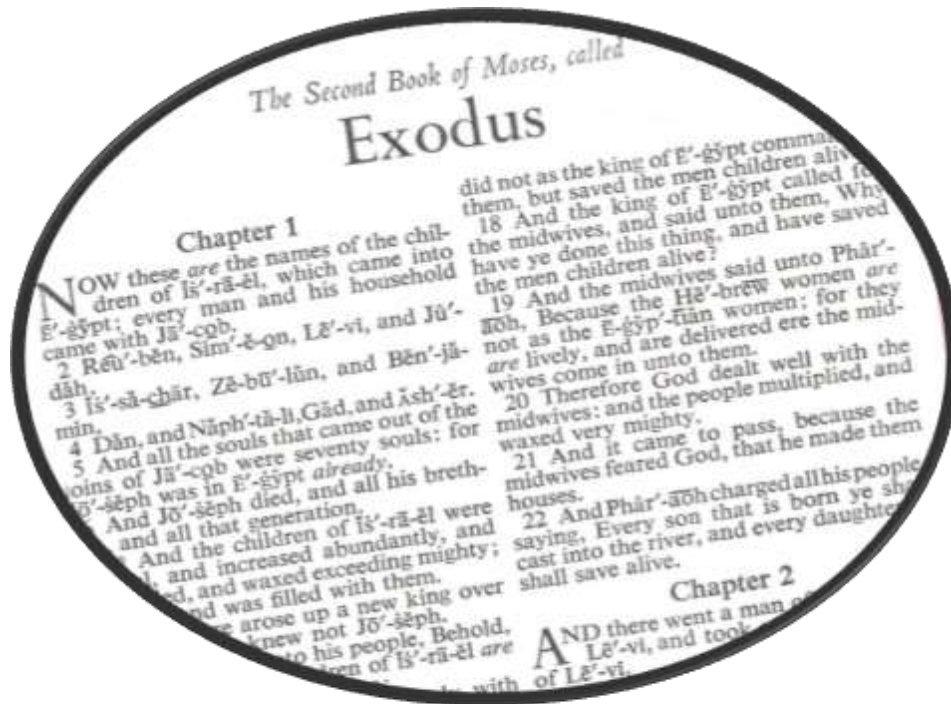


EXODUS – WEEK 23

GOD RELENTS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 33:7–34:21 – God Relents

Moses talks with God and gets Him to pull back from His anger and His plans.

Moses's wears his heart on his sleeve and that makes all the difference. His love for God and for his people comes through.

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Thank you.

Exodus 33:7–34:21 – God Relents
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1 Exodus 33:7-11 (NKJV)

Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

Until the formal tabernacle is built, Moses's tent will do. For now, it's the place to meet with God. Of course, if God doesn't relent from His declared punishment, there won't be many meetings and there won't be any need for the real tabernacle. Israel is on the bubble, and Moses needs some serious facetime with the LORD to try and work this out.

Notice the high level of security. *Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp.* When Moses went to the tent, *each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle.* When he left, *his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.* The tent is well secluded and well-guarded. It sure looks like they're nervous.

Good. They should be. These are the ultimate closed-door meetings.

But Moses is the perfect guy to try and work this out. *The LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.* And when God showed up, the people did the right thing. *All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door.*

God will ultimately relent, but this is a killer of a wake-up call.

Speaking to God face-to-face would be paradise. We won't get that in this life, but we should long for it.

Every Christian prays. We're especially faithful when asking God for favors. Those prayers are OK, but a heart for prayer is a heart that seeks God's face.

Here's a prayer to try. Think of a topic where you need the LORD's guidance. Bring that up before Him and then get as quiet as you can and try to discern His will. Concentrate on just listening. If you get distracted – I get distracted by my heartbeat – just keep trying.

Though this prayer can be magnificent, at some point you may get frustrated. That's okay. This should morph into long-term awareness. God's answer may come much later, when you least expect it.

This is sometimes called "practicing the presence of God." Seek His face always, not just in prayer.

2 Exodus 33:12-17 (ESV)

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Moses goes to bat for Israel and hits a home run. He starts off by simply stating the problem, but in a wonderfully personal way. Rather than saying straight up that God won't be with them, he complains that, “*you have not let me know whom you will send with me.*”

He's objecting to being led by a stranger! That's why he then points out that God had said, “*I know you by name.*”

Then Moses asks for something that sounds off topic. Instead of asking for God to go with them, his request is, “*please show me now your ways.*” It implies God's presence – if He's not there, He can't show Moses anything – but it has a personal feel. Moses wants God there, not for the material benefits, but so he can get to know Him better. He then caps this off with, “*Consider too that this nation is your people.*”

So God relents and says, “*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*” Moses chooses that moment to say, “*If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.*” This is an odd time to say that; God just said He's coming. Actually, it's just the Hebrew way of repeating something for emphasis. God's presence is important to him. God responds in kind and reiterates His promise and reiterates why.

English communication avoids repetition; it feels clumsy and redundant. In Hebrew it's common, especially as a way of emphasizing something. Get used to it.

Moses never even hints at arguing Israel's goodness. He knows all too well that they are a stiff-necked people.

But Moses has a caring heart. He doesn't admire them; he loves them.

This kind of caring heart is exactly the kind of heart Christians seek. Ask the LORD to transform your heart so that you can love people who, for one reason or another, aren't easy to love.

Ask Him to teach us to care about, and for, people whom we have been overlooking.

3 Exodus 33:18-34:3 (ESV)

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

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 by 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.”

Moses’ request to see God’s glory is almost childlike. He just made a wonderful personal appeal to God’s mercy and won a reprieve for the people of Israel. God’s going to accompany them on their journey to the Promised Land. So now he just blurts out a request to see God’s glory.

What does, “*show me your glory*,” mean anyway? From God’s response, we see that it must mean seeing God without veiling. Seeing His face would be more glory than even Moses can handle, so he only gets to see the LORD’s back. Still, God does grant this unique request.

God also gives Moses a mulligan on the stone tablets. Moses never asked for permission to destroy God’s handwork, nor for forgiveness for breaking them, nor did he ask for replacements. But God, on His own initiative, allows them to be replaced, while letting Moses off the hook for his impetuous temper tantrum.

This is beautiful “child of God” stuff. Sure, Moses is imperfect – he has been and will be error-prone – but he’s being himself. He loves the LORD and acts on that love in a typically human way. He’s following the greatest commandment, which he will later record in Deuteronomy 6:5 (ESV).

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

There’s a curious twist to this. “Love God *with all your might*,” sounds like it takes effort. Yet Moses asking to see God’s glory doesn’t take any effort.

That part of loving God doesn’t take effort. That simple infatuation-love is a gift, one we should ask for.

The other part of loving God is obeying His commands. That does take work, or at least attention. Still, it isn’t exactly effort based either. Sure, if we make a mockery of Jesus’ lordship that’s a disaster, but if we rely on our own strength to be the Christians He wants us to be, we fall into a trap.

We need to ask for the strength and the focus to grow in Christ so as to serve Him better. Ask for that too.

4 Exodus 34:4-9 (ESV)

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 worshiped. And he said, “If now I have found favor 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.”

We’re all familiar with the typical portrayal of the two tablets. Unfortunately, that image is probably pretty far off.

They are usually depicted as two large stones with round tops. They are often shown with five commandments written on each one – which we’ve already pointed out is wrong.

There’s no indication that they were large – and the rounded tops are unlikely. The Bible doesn’t detail what the tablets looked like; it’s just says that Moses *took in his hand two tablets of stone*.

In a Hebrew Bible, the Ten Commandments take up a space less than 4 x 4 inches on the page. Even if the finger of God writes in much larger letters, the Ten Commandments would still fit on both sides of a 12x12-inch tablet. Two of those would be plenty heavy. Consider these details.

While God made the first set of stones, this time Moses has to cut them. With primitive tools, this would involve splitting off pieces of shale or some similar rock. These stones would be like flagstones (which are very heavy). If they’re big, they have to be thick, or they’ll break when split off. Smaller ones can be thinner though. Also, rounding the tops would be difficult (not to mention pointless).

So, unless Moses can carry a couple of fifty-pound stones *in his hand*, they’d have to be small.

Pray for our nation’s leaders. They bear a heavy burden too. If we analyzed the details of how they do their jobs, we’d be overwhelmed. We live in an age of partisan fervor. This can dissuade us from praying for them. It should be just the opposite; they need our prayers now more than ever.

Yes, they are often frustratingly inept. Who knows, they just might be as sinful as we are! Yes, they did volunteer for this line of work. Yes, yes, yes, lots of things aren’t as they should be.

Ask the LORD to bless our leaders and their families. Ask Him to give them courage, wisdom and peace.

5 Exodus 34:10-16 (ESV)

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.

The psychological details here are fascinating. God says, “Behold, I am making a covenant.” As part of the covenant, *He will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation.* But the Israelites must keep their side of the bargain too. So, what exactly is their side of the bargain?

The LORD says, “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.” The words, “Take care,” indicate that there’s some kind of hazard or slippery slope involved. God confirms this by ending with, “lest it become a snare in your midst.”

Between these bookends, God warns them not to *make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land.* This is the slippery slope God tells them to *take care* to avoid. This is the snare.

Notice the specifics of how they are to avoid this slippery slope. They are to, *tear down their altars and break their pillars.* All the “other gods” must go. And notice the ending – “lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land.” If they let people keep their false gods, it sets up the snare.

Then He explains the psychology of how this snare works. “*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.*”

It’s a three-step process. First you eat with them; then your sons marry their daughters; then your sons are led astray. That’s the slippery slope in detail. It’s a classic case of how people slowly fall away.

“Lead us not into temptation,” is part of the Lord’s Prayer – but do we pay attention to what we’re asking? This petition made it into the Lord’s Prayer because it is one of the top things to pray for. We deceive ourselves if we are not attentive to spiritual dangers.

Being attentive means praying. Ask God to help you avoid temptation. Don’t just pray about the temptations you’re aware of; ask the LORD to open your eyes to the ones you aren’t.

6 Exodus 34:17-21 (NKJV)

“You shall make no molded gods for yourselves.

“The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt.

“All that open the womb are Mine, and every male firstborn among your livestock, whether ox or sheep. But the firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his 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 plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.”

This section basically repeats, with some clarifications, commands the LORD gave before. First and foremost, God says, “You shall make no molded gods for yourselves.” Just in case it’s not obvious, the golden calf was **not** OK. It’s funny how sometimes stating the obvious is useful, even necessary. My favorite example of this is from *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* by Jean Kerr.

Christopher gets up ahead of the rest of us on Sunday mornings and he has long since been given a list of clear directives: ‘Don’t wake the baby,’ ‘Don’t go outside in your pajamas,’ ‘Don’t eat cookies before breakfast.’ But I never told him, ‘Don’t make flour paste and glue together all the pages of the magazine section of the Sunday Times.’ Now I tell him, of course.

We love children who do this, just as God loves His people. Still, it’d be cute if there was a Hebrew expression for “piece of work” because that describes the Israelites (and us) to a tee.

One other clarification is a thing of wonder. “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.”

The Sabbath rest is more important than any deadline.

People bend rules. We make up clever excuses for why something doesn’t apply to us or doesn’t mean what it sounds like it means. At harvest time, the Israelites will think, “Surely God wouldn’t want us to jeopardize the harvest.”

Wrong! Honoring the Sabbath means taking it seriously. We don’t kid around with the, “Thou shalt not” commandments. Why kid around with this one? Ask God to show you where you’re bending the rules.

This doesn’t mean you should keep the Sabbath the way everyone else does. You should rest from whatever is work for you. Studying history is work for some people (e.g., students) but a pastime for others. Dedicate the day to God and ignore the rat race.

And make sure you put deadlines on hold.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you ever pray to know God better or to be closer to Him?
2. Can you replicate the feelings you have for those close to you so as to love others the same way?
3. What does it mean to love God with all your strength?
4. Does politics corrupt people?
5. Have you ever caught yourself on a slippery slope?
6. How is your honoring of the Sabbath different or unique?

Items for prayer: