

Prayer

We pray, Lord God, with joy and thanks. With joy because our hearts have been inspired by Your call and we know that with Your strength and power, we cannot fail. With thanks, because we know that our sins are forgiven and You love us with an everlasting passion. Keep us close to You throughout the ups and downs of our everyday lives, and may our joy and thanks brighten this day, both for us and for others: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Water

Water is essential for everyone, for drinking, cooking and washing, at least. This week, we will pray about issues connected with water, and pray today that the Lord will sustain our rainfall.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are unemployed, with little prospect of finding jobs*
- *Pray for industrialists facing ethical and environmental dilemmas*
- *Give thanks for the young people and children in your wider family*

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:

And loving others, with all of your heart.

Serve the Lord by giving Him your worship:

By joining with the praises of all His people!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Great Commission:

To take the Good News to the ends of the earth.

Serve Him by being His priests in the world:

Praying for others, and meeting their needs.

Serve the Lord by being an honest disciple:

Living every day by the touch of His presence.

Serve the Lord by fighting against all evil:

Wherever you find it, in yourself or in others.

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

There is no reward, save peace with Your Lord.

Bible Study - Exodus 34:1-9

¹ The LORD said to Moses, 'Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready in the morning, and then come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No one may come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen on any part of the mountain; and do not allow flocks or herds to graze at the foot of the mountain.'

⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, just as the LORD had commanded him, holding the two tablets of stone. ⁵ The LORD came down in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed His name; 'The LORD.'

⁶ The LORD passed in front of Moses, and proclaimed,

'The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God,

Slow to anger, rich in steadfast love, and truthful,

⁷ keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation,

Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,

yet by no means clearing the guilty,

But visiting the sin of parents on the children's children
to the third and the fourth generation.'

⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head to the ground, and worshipped. ⁹ He said, 'If I have indeed found favour in your eyes, then, O Lord please go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take possession of us.'

Review

This is a powerful text, and in a small way, it foretells something of the New Testament Gospel. In summary, when the people made and worshipped the golden calf, they did so because they needed a visible representation of God. This was a terrible sin and it had grave consequences (ch.32); there was a mini 'civil war' within Israel, they suffered a plague, Moses shattered God's tablets of stone etched with the Ten Commandments, and Moses himself went through a crisis of confidence (chs. 32,33). However, God remained faithful to His promise to remain with His people, and our passage today fulfils God's promise of a personal reassurance to Moses that He had heard his prayer, and would save His people. This was possible because of the people's repentance (33:4f.) and Moses intercession (33:12f.). The Lord remains faithful to His people today, except that He now does everything through Jesus Christ His Son.

At this point in the story, we may be uncertain about how many times Moses had been to the top of Mount Sinai! Depending on which ascent counts as a full climb to the top, this is probably the third ascent. The first was for a brief stay prior to the giving of the Law (19:21-24), and the second was a period of forty days and nights for the giving of the instructions about the Tabernacle and the priesthood (24:9,15 to 31:18). This third summons to the top of the mountain was a second stay for forty days and nights (34:28), and for the purpose of obtaining a second set of the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments; something that was vital for the construction of the Tabernacle (34:1,4). Because of the holiness of the event, God set out similar rules as before to prevent people and animals coming near the mountain (34:3) during Moses' ascent. Nothing would go wrong this time (19:10-15)!

The truly remarkable part of our reading is from verse 5 onwards. Fulfilling His personal promise to Moses, God declared His name out loud within Moses' hearing (34:5). The Israelites would not have known how to pronounce the letters JHWH, because to say His name would have been regarded as highly irreligious; they would have simply called Him 'the Lord'. So what we have here is a unique revelation; in hearing God speak, Moses would have heard not just God's own voice, but the definitive sound of God's name! How we would love to know what he heard! Scholars have argued about the pronunciation of JHWH for centuries, spawning a wide range of possibilities 'Jehovah', and 'Yahweh', for example.

However, the revelation is not so much in the name itself, but in the following poem, revealing the Lord's own character (34:6-7). It is strange to read something said by God about Himself; there is nothing else quite like this in Scripture! I have written this speech by God together with the introduction in the form of a Hebrew poem, because the whole section appears to have been put together poetically so it could be recited. Even if the Israelite people would not say God's name, this was something they could say without fear, because it was what God had said about Himself!

To this day, we celebrate the fact that God is essentially good, or as this passage says, He is 'merciful and gracious'. To explain this, He adds, 'slow to anger, rich in steadfast love and truthful'. All these words are important; they crop up frequently throughout the story of God's people. In particular, God's love is described as faithful, steadfast, and lasting forever. That is, to the thousandth generation, being 40,000 years by the standard Israelite reckoning of 40 years per generation! Moreover, God declared that He did not ignore sin, but limited its consequences for future generations (34:7).

The essential character of God has not changed, though we now know more because of Jesus Christ. What Jesus has done is to provide a definitive example of God's love and goodness, and ensure that His mercy is available for all who believe in Him. If people today say 'what is God like?' Then we should be able to say, 'read Exodus 34:6,7'!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What is distinct about the third time Moses went up Mount Sinai (34:1-4)?
- What is the significance of the Lord's 'name' (34:5,6)
- What do we learn about the Lord's character in this passage (34:6,7)
- Why does the Lord 'visit sin' on future generations (34:7)?

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** ***'cut for yourself two tablets of stone'** Some Bible versions miss out the words 'for yourself', but they are present in the Hebrew. They signal the fact that these stones are to be the work of Moses and not God, like the former ones.*
- V3** ***'do not let anyone be seen on any part of the mountain'** The Hebrew says 'let no one be seen throughout the mountain'. However, we interpret this to mean that no one should walk on or climb any part of the mountain, hence the translation.*
- V7** ***'keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation'** Some Bible versions have 'keeping steadfast love to thousands', however, although there is no word for 'generations' in the text, the Hebrew usually uses the plural of a number to mean that number of 'generations'. This is what is done later in the verse, referring to the third and the fourth generations.*
- V9** ***'... and take possession of us.'** Many Bible versions have 'take us for your inheritance'. The Hebrew word is certainly used for when people take the Lord's inheritance, but here, the subject of the sentence is the Lord. He does not take an inheritance, He takes possession of things to give as an inheritance, and this is how I have translated the sentence here.*

Going Deeper

What is distinct about the third time Moses went up Mount Sinai (34:1-4)?

Many people have a mental picture of Moses going up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from the Lord; but this picture owes more to Hollywood than to the Bible. The first thing to note is this; Moses had to carve out the stones at the foot of the mountain and carry them with him up to the top of the mountain for God to 'write' them again. This is highly symbolic, for although the Moses broke the original copies because of the people's sin, he had to bear the consequences of his actions by replacing what was broken and carrying them up the mountain on what was an arduous climb. The first section of our reading retraces our steps back to the original 'law-giving' on Mount Sinai (chs 19 & 20). Even the mountain becomes holy and unapproachable by people or animals again, just as earlier (34:3, see 19:10f.).

There is some controversy about verse 1, because this is where God says that He will write on the stones. This seems straightforward enough until later on in the chapter we read; 'the Lord instructed Moses, "write these words ..."' (34:27). So who wrote the Ten Commandments on this second set of stones, was it God or was it Moses? Moreover, if Moses wrote them, why does our passage tell us that God would do it? Surely if Moses was reporting all this, he would know whether he wrote, or God did! Because of these logical inconsistencies, those who argue that the Bible cannot be the infallible 'Word of God' have used these verses (34:1 and 27) as proof texts.

It is a little pedantic to take the issue this far. Throughout Scripture and throughout Christian experience today, we learn that God delights to work through people so that they do His work on earth. It is always possible to look at some event and say 'so-and-so did it' and also for someone else to say 'God did it', and for both to be true. It is not too difficult to see how this might arise, for example, when people describe the consequences of a bore-hole being sunk in a dry land to give people a ready supply of water.

In the case of our passage, it seems that Moses was comfortable with saying both 'God wrote them' and 'I wrote them' in different parts of his narrative, because the truth was that he 'wrote' them at God's behest and dictation. We do not have to try and make more of the matter than that.

What is the significance of the Lord's 'name' (34:5,6)

In accordance with God's promise made earlier (33:19), he stood in front of Moses and pronounced his name 'the Lord' (the Hebrew four letters JHWH – see above). Some might wonder why verse 5 records this event, but then the passage goes on to say 'the Lord passed in front of Moses and proclaimed 'the Lord, the Lord ...' (34:6). Again, some versions of the Bible do not help by presenting the first half of verse 6 as merely a follow-on sentence from verse 5, and this makes the account sound merely repetitive. However, this is not the case. The whole of verse 6 is part of a Hebrew poem, which is a full explanation of the name 'the Lord'.

In the ancient world, people believed that character and name were integrally linked, and there is another example of the link between people and name in our passage today. In verse 9, Israel is described as a 'stiff-necked people' (34:9), and this phrase is an elaboration on the name of Israel and its meaning, which, according to how the Hebrew word is pronounced, means something like 'rebellious' or 'obstinate' people.

Although the name of the Lord was written JHWH (as we have seen), the Israelite people did not attempt to pronounce this name because it was regarded as too holy to speak. In common usage, the Israelites used a different Hebrew word 'Adonai' meaning 'the Lord', and they had a general word for 'God' for which the Hebrew was 'Elohim'. Even though this sounds very complex, we should not complain, because Christians use a variety of names for Jesus; 'Jesus', 'Jesus Christ', 'the Christ', and other words expressing the nature

of God and the Holy Spirit. It remains true that God has always revealed Himself in a number of different ways to people. However, He is still one God with the same set of characteristics, and this scripture records the one place where God declared His own qualities.

What do we learn about the Lord's character in this passage (34:6,7)

The first thing we learn about God is that He is a God of mercy and grace (34:6). The Hebrew words used here have a variety of meanings themselves, but the first word translated 'mercy' expresses feelings and emotions, and is often translated as 'compassionate'. Consequently, the first thing we learn about God is that He has feelings, just as we do! The second word is a Hebrew word meaning either 'favour' or 'grace'. This means that God has a generous attitude towards people and is prepared to be accommodating to requests made to Him. The word 'favour' comes from its use at royal courts, where people would go to a ruling monarch to seek a petition. If the king responded positively to the request made, then he judged in 'favour' of the petition; if he was disinclined to yield to the request, he responded with 'rejection'. By using the word 'favour' or 'grace' in this instance, God indicated His positive and favourable response to the repentance of the people, and their request that He travel with them on their journey to Canaan (33:1f.).

The characteristic of 'slow to anger' indicates God's long-suffering and patience with people. He has always had that property and does so to this day, even though we have been called to present the Gospel with urgency so that people make a decision now. This property is closely linked to that of 'steadfast love', an expression that translates the famous Hebrew words 'cheseth', which is used throughout the Old Testament to describe the quality of God's love that will not stop despite all human sin and rebellion. This is the quality of love sometimes called 'covenant love', because God's covenant with His people lasts forever. The Lord is always waiting for people and He never stops; His patience lasts for thousands of years and for virtually countless generations (34:7).

The Lord also forgives wickedness, sin and rebellion; and here, the text of Exodus uses three classic Hebrew words, all of which are often translated by the simple English word 'sin'. These words remind us that God has a complete understanding of how people turn away from Him. He is always willing to forgive, but there are always consequences to sin. This is a message we do not like to hear today!

Why does the Lord 'visit sin' on future generations (34:7)?

The last part of the Lord's self declared characteristics are presented to us at the end of verse 7, and they have caused considerable controversy. Even though the Lord's patience lasts for thousands of generations, the text says that the Lord will 'visit' sin upon the children of those who sin 'to the third and fourth generation'. It is tempting for us to suggest that perhaps the link is genetic, and that if sin is committed by someone the reasons may be to do with the 'kind of people' that they are, as defined by their genes; something that lasts for several generations until it is 'diluted' by the normal genetic processes of procreation.

We are not talking about genetics here, but spiritual reality, and we need to look at this in a different way. There are always consequences to sin, and although Christian preachers like to say that once we have given our lives to Christ then the 'slate is wiped clean' of our sins. Too many people have since discovered that this is a generalisation too far that is not entirely supported by Scripture. I will comment upon the New Testament understanding of the consequences of sin in the last part of this study, but for now, we will look at what this text says.

This passage says that God's character, which is reflected in the way that He has made the world is that there are always consequences to sin, but God has limited this to three or four generations. Now, even today, it is well known that familial traits such as anger can be passed down from one generation to another. A young child, for example, will pick up the expressions of anger from a parent, for example, and continue to suffer from its consequences unless they respond by rejecting it because of some other factors in their lives. This is like a 'fact of life', something that seems built in to the way the world works; sin against God and how He has made the world and the people who live in it always has consequences. Nevertheless, the Old Testament says that God has limited this in time, and this is surely an act of mercy so that sin does not persist forever through the generations.

We may not like this aspect of the Old Testament, but God's character is a pointer to what He does in the New Testament, which we will now look at further.

Application

What Jesus does for us on the Cross is to provide a means whereby sin is dealt with once and for all before Jesus, so that the sins of parents are not visited on their children. In God's grace, each person is now responsible for their own sins, providing they submit this to the Lord (as prophesied in 2 Kings 14:6, 2 Chron 25:4). The key point here is that the sins are submitted to the Lord for His cleansing. All too often, when people are brought to faith, they are promised that the Lord will deal with all their sins, but they are not led to a place where they are enabled to confess these sins and deal with them. Consequently, some Christians

carry immense burdens of sin within them that remain un-confessed, and they consequently are unable to take the benefit of what the Lord can do for them. It is vital therefore, that people respond to the Lord by confessing their sins and dealing with them specifically, perhaps with guidance and help from other Christians, so that they can be free from the consequences of the past. This cannot be assumed.

Of course, these things are but one part of this text, and there are many other essential and important features of it. The most significant aspect of this text is that God declares Himself to be loving and caring, and to have emotions just like we do. It is vital that we appreciate this part of God's character. Often, people will hold all manner of ideas in their minds about God and His nature, but surely, we must read carefully what He says about this Himself, and pay attention to it.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What would you list as the characteristics of God, and how does this list compare with what is found here in this passage?
2. Have a look at what verse 7 says about God and people: do you find this to be a reflection of God and life as you find it, and if not, why not?
3. Would it be true to say that God's people the church are a 'stiff-necked people' as were the children of Israel?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have always found it hard to keep a track of how many times Moses went up and down Mount Sinai, and for what reason. If you read different versions of the Bible, you may come out with different conclusions than I, because some of the descriptions of what Moses was doing (particularly in Exodus 19) are rather unclear in Hebrew. Nevertheless, I can recommend studying Exodus carefully and following each step of what happens with care, because this will enable you to get a far better understanding of what God was doing by giving the law to Moses. In this way, you will be able to understand what is said about the 'law' and Moses in the New Testament, and what Jesus means by 'fulfilling the law' (Matt 5:17) for example.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Answer question one (above) for yourself, by writing your own list of the characteristics of God, and then comparing it with what you can find here in this passage. The differences may tell you a great deal about yourself and your own faith.
- Pray for people you know, especially those who do not have a good understanding of God and His nature, for whatever reason. Pray that they might come to know the graciousness of God and the truth about His love for people and also about His justice and equity in all things.

Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, You have come to my soul. Fill me with love and compassion, grace and truth, integrity and honesty, and a sincere desire for justice in Your Name. And now, as You bless me, use me as a channel of Your grace to flow out from me to others according to Your gracious will. AMEN
