

God & Israel push the reset button. Exodus 34

We've all had the experience of putting something together only to have to take it apart and start over. That's ok if it's just a gas grill, but it's not okay if it's your life.

Your career..... Your marriage..... Your dreams.....

- At age 5 his father died.
- At age 16 he quit school.
- At age 17 he had already lost four jobs.
- At age 18 he got married.
- Between ages 18 and 22, he was a railroad conductor and failed.
- He joined the army and washed out there.
- He applied for law school, he was rejected.
- He became an insurance sales man and failed again.
- At age 19 he became a father.
- At age 20 his wife left him and took their baby daughter.
- He became a cook and dishwasher in a small cafe.
- He failed in an attempt to kidnap his own daughter, but eventually he convinced his wife to return home.
- At age 65 he retired.
- On the 1st day of retirement he received a check from the Government for \$105.
- He felt that the Government was saying that he couldn't provide for himself.
- He decided to commit suicide, life wasn't worth living anymore; he had failed so much.
- He sat under a tree to write out his will, but instead began writing out what he wished he had accomplished in life. He realized there was much more that he hadn't yet done. And there was one thing he could do better than anyone he knew; that was how to cook.
- So he borrowed \$87 against his check, bought and fried up some chicken using his recipe, and went door to door selling them to his neighbors in Kentucky.
- At age 88.....Colonel Sanders, founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) Empire was a billionaire.

The moral of this story is that it's never too late to start all over.

When we left the people of Israel last week at the close of chapter 32, everything had been lost. After the people had vowed to live by God's covenant and laws, Moses went back up the mountain to receive further instructions for building the tabernacle. But when he stayed up there for 40 days, the people decided that he wasn't coming back. So they built an idol in the shape of a golden calf and began to worship it.

This defiant disobedience just days after they had vowed to obey the Covenant God had made with them was too much for God's patience. While Moses succeeded in quickly talking God out of in His wrath consuming the entire people, he couldn't get God to forgive them. God's special relationship with the Children of Israel was over.

Only because of His close relationship with Moses, God said He would continue keep His covenant promises which He had made with the Patriarchs, to get these people to the promised land, but He no longer considered the Children of Israel to be His special treasure, or a distinctly God blessed people. Chapter 33 of Exodus opens with these words.

*The Lord said to Moses, 'Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "To your descendants I will give it."... Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; **but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.**'*

But then the most amazing thing happened.



When the people heard that God would no longer go with them or bless them, they mourned and they repented of their sin (33:4-6). So Moses went back up the mountain to plead their case with God.

*Moses said, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, **let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your***

***inheritance.**' Exodus 34:9*

True to His name which He had just declared to Moses, God forgave Israel ...for everything.

Chapter 34 then, finds God agreeing with Moses to do a complete start over with Israel. So Moses cuts two more stone tablets to replace the ones that had been earlier shattered and he heads back up Mount Sinai for another 40 day period where God again gives him the commandments for the people to live by. This time the people knew to behave and wait patiently for Moses to return.

God said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the other dwellers in the land. Exodus 34:10-11

So God reestablishes His Covenant with the people and again writes His Commandments out on the second set of tablets, but this time with an emphasis on not going after other religions, or casting any other idols and especially on honoring the Sabbath, along with the three seasonal festivals they had earlier been told to keep.



But there was something very different this time when Moses came back down the mountain. Scripture records that **his face was radiant**. It glowed so brightly that it scared the people. Moses had to call the people to come to him and reassured them that it was safe to do so. **But Moses' face remained glowing thereafter as a very visible sign to the people that his role as mediator between them and God, had reached a new and very authoritative level.** Never again would the people dismiss him as "that man Moses." Still, his glowing face continued to unnerve the people, so thereafter for the rest of his life, Moses wore a veil over his face when talking to the people, but he would remove the veil whenever he went into the tent of meeting to talk with God.



An interesting bit of trivia about Moses' glowing face is that the Hebrew words for "radiant" and "horn" use the same consonants but different vowels. But since the vowel's were not written out in the Hebrew language, St. Jerome's Latin Bible mistranslated the word as horns. Which is why Michelangelo's statue shows Moses with horns.

While Moses had been up on the mountain, he had also asked to "see God's glory," a request God could not completely fulfill, because He said that to do so would kill His friend. So instead God tucked him into a cleft of the rock putting his hand over the rock while he passed by reciting His full name for Moses to hear.

"The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty,

Exodus 34:6-7

*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, a God **merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love** for the thousandth generation, **forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing***

the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Exodus 34:6-7

Moses had asked to see the physical appearance of God, instead he got a verbal description of God's character; a description which will be repeated nine more times throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

The reason why this descriptive name is so important for us to understand, is because it tells us why God could so completely forgive both the children of Abraham back then and continue to forgive our sins today. So let's take a brief look at these descriptions.

- 1. The word **Compassionate:**** comes from the Hebrew word for "womb" signaling that God's feelings for humanity are like that of a mother for the children who came out of her own body. The Psalmist phrased it this way, *As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.* (Psalm 103:13-14)
- 2. **Gracious:**** Here is a good phrase by which to remember what this characteristic means: *Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Grace is getting what we do not deserve.* In mercy God forgives us our sin, through Grace God gives us salvation. Our salvation is thus a gift of God's grace. As our Bible says, *while we were yet enemies Christ died for us;* that is Grace in action (Romans 5:8)
- 3. **Slow to Anger:**** A lot of people think of the God of the Old Testament as angry and judgmental which this episode with the golden calf seemingly illustrated. But the truth is that the angry God of the Old Testament is the same loving God of the New Testament. As Dennis Prager noted, *God gets angry at people, but it takes a great deal to make Him angry (otherwise, given the state of human behavior, He would presumably be in a permanent state of anger). And because God is slow to anger, people have time to repent before He exacts any harsh punishments.* (Rational Bible, pg 466).

Many years later speaking through Ezekiel, God pleads with the people of Israel who are once again wandering away to other gods, *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live* Ezekiel 18:23, 32.

In the days following Christ's ascension into Heaven with a promise to return, when persecuted Christians were wishing that Jesus would hurry up and come back, the Apostle Peter explained to them *the Lord is not slow about His promise [to return], as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* 2 Peter 3:9

4. **Abounding in Kindness:** The Hebrew word here is “chesed” which refers to an extraordinary kindness above and beyond the call of duty; doing more for a person than they could normally expect. Thus, it is often translated “loving Kindness.” It is this form of kindness that Jesus was referring to when he taught that if you are compelled to carry a soldier’s equipment for one mile... carry it for two miles (Mt. 5:41-42) . Christians are also instructed to pray for their enemies, as well as – if given the opportunity – feeding and clothing them and in this way to overcoming evil with goodness; that is “chesed” in action.

5. **Abounding in Faithfulness:** This Hebrew word here is literally translated as “true.” God is true to His vows, promises and standards. We just saw this faithfulness in action when God reiterated His promise to still get the people of Israel to the Holy Land, even before they had asked forgiveness for their sins.

6. **Extending Kindness to the thousandth generation**

7. **Remembering the sins of the parents to the third & fourth generation:**

This phrase is hyperbole meaning that God’s desire to reward the good is far greater than His inclination to punish evil. Because the Bible clearly teaches that parents cannot be punished for their child’s sin and neither can the children be punished for their parents’ sin (Deut. 24:16, Ezk. 18:20). But it does illustrate the truth that both good and bad parenting have lasting effects – positive or negative – on the generations that follow.

I found a surprising illustration of such “generational inheritance” in Malcolm Gladwell’s book “The Tipping Point,” which explained that many 19th and 20th century Appalachian Mountain feuds and some still current Southern attitudes of “defending the family’s honor,” grew out of clan traditions in Scotland based on guarding the family’s flock from theft or harm. We are easily two to three hundred years now removed from the need to protect the family’s sheep and yet the inclination to “take no guff from others” still lives on in Southern culture.

8. **Forgiving Sin,**

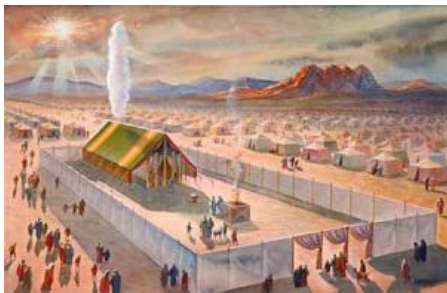
9. **Yet by no means clearing the guilty.** This expression highlights that while God can forgive any and all of our sins so that they no longer hinder our relationship with Him, it does not mean that there will be no further consequences from our sins; there is still a need to satisfy justice.

The story is told of a father who could not control his angry rebellious son. So he decided that every time his son disobeyed or defied him, he would go outside to the front fence by the sidewalk and drive a nail halfway into a post. Rather quickly that fence post came to be filled with nails –

looking like a porcupine; a proclamation for all to see the son's level of rebellion. As the son watched the number of nails grow so did his shame in what they represented and he experienced a real change of heart.

Asking how he could get those nails removed his father told him that for every day that he obeyed, he could pull out a nail. So eventually the post was once again free of nails, but to his horror the son realized that the post was now scarred with many holes. Asking how he could undo the holes, his dad sadly replied that while the nails could be removed, the damage could not be undone; that post would remain scarred for the rest of its life. The boy wept.

But the very next morning as he left the house, the boy joyfully discovered that overnight his dad had dug up the scarred post and replaced it with a brand new post, with no holes. That is the interaction between grace and justice and certainly a testimony for what happens to us when we – by faith – are born again into God's family.



So, how does the story of the golden calf end?

As we will learn next week when we reach the conclusion of the book of Exodus, like the rebellious child in the last story, the people of Israel not only repented of their sins with the golden calf, but with this second chance they also showed a dramatic change of heart. So that when Moses called for an offering of gold and other supplies for the building the

Ark and the tabernacle, the people continued daily giving more and more material until Moses had to order them to stop giving, for the artisans had more than enough of everything needed to complete the job (36:2-7).

So that is the happy conclusion of the story of the golden calf. For the rest of their time in the wilderness the people never again fell into idolatry. This doesn't mean that they stopped all their grumbling. And they also experienced another rebellious crisis of faith when the spies returned with the report of giants living in their Promised Land, but those are all stories for another day.

What remains for today is to ask what you have learned about God or yourself from this story of rebellion and forgiveness? I would suggest that while God does not like rebellion on the part of His children, He is always ready to forgive when we are ready to repent. Like Colonial Sanders and the people of Israel, it is never too late to start over. We are never so far from home that we cannot just turn around and return. Let's pray about this.