

Rising to the Challenge

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Date: 01 October 2023

Preacher: Ben Fiddian

[0 : 0 0] word. Well, it's possible these days to waste an awful lot of time watching short videos on YouTube and Facebook, and occasionally you come across a story, a video clip, showing a remarkable rescue. Perhaps there's a mother whose children are in a car, and the car's in trouble, and somehow she manages to find the strength to push the car out of the way of trouble.

Something kicks in, an extraordinary strength that the person doesn't normally have, an extraordinary courage, and somehow they rise to the challenge. And you might ask them afterwards, well, how do you do it? I didn't know I had it in me. And there's something like that going on here in Exodus 32 through 34. If you read through the earlier chapters of Exodus, you see God's glory again and again. He meets with Moses at the burning bush. He reveals His glory and His holiness there, His willingness to deliver an oppressed people. We see the glory of Him keeping His promises like no one else. And we see His glory in the plagues against Egypt and the overthrow of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. There are these different challenges, and God has risen to each one. But in chapter 32, there's a new challenge, a new predicament, something that we haven't really faced yet.

You see, the Israelites have broken God's covenant. On the very day it was being written in stone, and they've brought His name into disrepute. And our question is, well, how will God rise to this challenge? How will God show His glory in this situation? Let's be clear about the sin.

What Israel does here is akin to committing adultery on their wedding day. They are being married to God in a holy and sacred covenant. And at that very moment, they're ascribing to an idol glory that is due to God alone. They make a statue of a cow, and they say, this is what brought us out of Egypt.

Well, now, that glory belongs to God. God was building His reputation, showing how strong He could be on behalf of His people, even moving an ocean so that they could escape. And Israel says, no, we won't ascribe the glory to God. We'll make a statue, something we can see. Something a little bit less scary than that is. We'll worship that. We'll worship that. And so God withdraws. God pulls back from them.

[3 : 2 2] And now it's the presence of God, it's His glory in their midst that makes them distinct. Without that, they're nothing. They're just another tribe somewhere in the Middle East. There's nothing special about them.

It's God's presence with them that makes them what they are. And God withdraws because of their sin. And so in chapter 33, Moses engages in comprehensive intercession, praying and praying and praying and going back day after day after day, withdrawing from the people to go out to God and plead with Him, to lay out before the Lord. This is our predicament. This is what we've done. And you've rightly withdrawn from us because of our sin. But without you were nothing. And if you won't come with us, there's no point going on. Lord, this is our predicament. Now show me your glory.

Show me how you will rise to this challenge. Show me how you, O Lord, our God, are superior even over this. Show us your glory as you showed it over the oppression in Egypt and over the idolatry of Egypt and over that false king Pharaoh. Show us your glory now, not over their sin and those sinners out there. Show us your glory over our sin and our depravity as your people. How, O God, will you shine against the dark backdrop of our sin and our failure. That's Moses' prayer. Show me your glory. Of course, Moses had already experienced God's glory in remarkable ways. But he wants to see God in this context. And as we come to chapter 34,

God is answering that prayer. And there's so much implied here that's not expounded for us. There is a tangible experience here. There's a cloud that glows with light and heat. And there's a presence which is so overwhelming that if Moses were to see it, he would die. He would just be consumed.

He'd be burned up. And so for Moses to even be here, God has to shelter him in a cave with his hand over the end of the cave, the opening of the cave to protect Moses. But this is God's inherent glory.

[6 : 21] God's inherent gloriousness. It's something about God that is part of who he is and what he is. And we can't know that in its fullness. It's beyond us. But God wants that glory to be known by people, by Moses, by the Israelites. And so he proclaims it. He puts that essence that we can't grasp into words that we can't grasp. He comes down to our level and speaks. God declares his name, the Lord, the Lord. And then he tells us what kind of person we are to think of when we hear that name.

God is asserting his reputation here. I don't know if you've ever been caught in a scandal. You've done something terribly wrong, perhaps, and they say, your name is mud. It's not what we want.

We prefer to be associated with our good traits, our generosity and our integrity. We want people to say, oh, yeah, I know him. I know her. She's kind. She's good. He's generous. There are certain famous people. You mention their name. If I say Winston Churchill, immediately in your head, you have an image of that man and you have ideas of things that he did. Things spring to mind.

Well, his name is the Lord. And what springs to mind when you hear the Lord? What do you think of? Who do you think of? What sort of character should we associate with the Lord's name?

And the first thing that God wants us to think of when we hear his name is his abundant mercy. His abundant mercy. Verse 6 and verse 7 of chapter 34.

[8 : 33] The Lord, the Lord, a God who is compassionate and gracious. The word for God here has the underlying idea of divine strength, the almighty power of God. And of course, strength and power can be used to do great evil. But God does not use his power in that way. He displays it in goodness. When his glory passes by, he says, I will show you my goodness. That will pass by. I'm a God who is fundamentally good.

And that goodness comes out in his compassion. Some translations might say mercy. He's a merciful God. If you're a mother and you've had young children who wake at 2 a.m. and cry, and there's an instinct inside you that says, it doesn't say, oh, that baby again. Oh, I just wish it would shut up and leave me alone. No, the mother's instinct says he needs me.

My baby needs me. And so even it's 2 a.m. and you've already been up three times, you get up and you care. You respond to that cry of weakness on instinct, regardless of the annoying behavior. And that's the idea of compassion. God says, I'm a God who's compassionate. There's a reflex in me that when I hear the cry of a needy creature, even a needy, sinful creature, I want to respond and care for you. But God is not just compassionate. He's also gracious. He shows people favor in a way that we can't compute. I don't know if there's any mathematicians here. I've heard of something called Fermat's Last Theorem. And as I understand it, there was this great mathematician who worked out a calculation, but no one else could do it. And for hundreds of years, other people were trying and they were unable to compute what he had done and unable to solve it. And I think eventually maybe it was solved, maybe it was solved. But there is no way of computing God's grace. There's no formula that you can put together that explains why God shows such favor to sinful people. It's beyond our capacity to comprehend. God is merciful. And he's gracious. He exercises his divine strength in a reflex provision for the helpless and the needy, showing them incomprehensible favor. But that's not enough. When we think of the Lord, we're also to think of a God who is slow to anger. God never condones sin.

But such is his love for the world that he's created, that even when we deserve punishment and judgment, he's hesitant to act. He doesn't want to act against the creation that he made, the creation that he loves, even when that creation is in rebellion against him.

But that's not enough. We're told that he's a God who is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

[12 : 32] We're not to think of these as limited terms. There's an abundance here now. This is not a trickle of steadfast love and faithfulness. This is an ocean of steadfast love and faithfulness.

We're to think of God as a being of vast resources and equally vast generosity and liberality in the kindness he shows. He's abundant in steadfast love, a covenant love.

A contracted love, a contracted love, sealed in blood, a committed love, a never failing, never giving up love. His mercy and his grace are not just an instinct, a reflex, like a dog that gets hungry when it hears you open the food cupboard. It's not that kind of reflex. It's something more than that. This is deliberate. God chooses to love and to display his kindness in this way.

Because in a manner that I can't comprehend, it causes him delight to do that. And his faithfulness to the covenant remains even when his people are unfaithful to him. He maintains his love to thousands.

And in many translations, it's thousands of generations. That's the idea here. He preserves his people. He keeps them. He guards them. He has this covenant commitment that deals with their sins so that he can stay with them and stay with them and with their children and with their children's children for generation after generation after generation. And we wonder, how does he do that? How can he do that when we as human beings are constantly rebelling against him, sinning against him? How can he remain so faithful to us? And the answer here is that he forgives wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness, wickedness is actions twisted because you want to do the wrong thing. Sin here is missing the mark accidentally. You didn't mean to, but you fall short because you're incapable of reaching the mark.

[15 : 14] And rebellion, rebellion is a willful, a willful violation, violation of the covenant relationship. It's treachery. That's to betray God, which is exactly what Israel did in chapter 32 when they turned their backs on him and worshipped an idol. Moses said, Lord, this is our predicament. Show me your glory. And God says, I'm a covenant, faithful God who is determined to love you and keep loving you, showing you kindness and compassion and mercy, incomputable grace for generation after generation after generation after generation. And the way I will do that, God says, is by rising to your problem with forgiveness. I see your sin. I raise you my forgiveness. Where your sin abounds, grace and mercy abound far more. God meets this problem, this predicament with the glory of his grace, offering a comprehensive forgiveness that lifts the burden off you, takes it away, covering the full range of potential sin and actual sin. Hallelujah.

Hallelujah. Well, you'll be glad to know that my next two points are much shorter, and that's because the emphasis in Scripture is much less. When you think of God, that's what God wants you to think of. The abundance of his kindness and his mercy. But there's something else here in verse 7, which is my second heading, restrained judgment. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. God is too good to condone sin. And there is always the possibility that somebody hears of this mercy of this grace and rejects it and hardens their hearts against that and rebels against God in such a way that refuses this display of his glory. Even though you are that God, I don't care. And my heart is hardened.

God then is declared to be good abundantly so. But in the case of a hardened sinner, we see God act according to the strict requirements of judgment and of justice.

But note the contrast, the overflowing abundance of his mercy and the strictness of his justice. He doesn't punish more than is deserved. There's this restriction placed on it. His grace and his mercy are for thousands and thousands of generations. His justice is for three or four generations.

The idea here is not that you get punished for your granddad's sin. It's that the patriarch in a family home. There may be three or four generations living there. And so the influence of that man's sin would necessarily taint the people who are living with him. He would live to see the impact of his sin on his children and their children. But no more. There's a line drawn here. God says justice will be according to the strict requirements of the law. Not for thousands of generations. Compare him to the gods of the nations at the time. And the fear that those tribes had because their gods were always angry.

[19 : 24] And maybe, possibly, if someone did enough, you might please the god for a week, a month. Not our gods. Generous and kind. As though, yes, he will resort to judgment, but only if you squeeze it out of him like blood out of a stone. Because he delights to show mercy. Is that the way you view God?

Many people don't view God that way. Even Christians live in fear of a god. And the idea they have is that God wants to judge me. And somehow I have to squeeze a drop of mercy out of him. Hopefully to get me through the next week. And then I'll go through the whole process again. And that is not the Bible's god.

That is not the god of the scriptures. That's not the Christian god. The Christian god delights to show mercy. And if you end up facing his judgment, it will be over his dead body.

Well, there's one more heading here. And briefly again, the heading is this, his absolute sovereignty. We have to jump back a couple of verses. But in chapter 33 and verse 19, he tells us that this mercy and this compassion, I will have mercy on whoever I want to have mercy.

And I will show compassion to whom I will show compassion. Sometimes we're forced to do things against our will. I was forced to buy the beatable Volvo instead of a brand new Ferrari simply because of my bank balance. I didn't really have a freedom of choice there. But God is not in any way constrained.

[21 : 21] He's not constrained this week because you think you did well and you read your Bible every day and you prayed for 11 minutes instead of seven. He's not constrained by that. He's not constrained by the fact that you fell into the same sin this week as you did last week. He's not constrained by your behavior in any way. He is absolutely sovereign to show mercy to whoever he wants to. Hallelujah.

Hallelujah. He delights to do it. Now that is his preference. Let's bring this to a conclusion. He shows mercy because he's good, not because you're good. And that's wonderful. And so there's the answer to Israel's predicament. There was nothing at all that they could do having fallen into this idolatry. There's nothing they could do to persuade God to come with them anymore. There's nothing they can do to manipulate God into being kind to them again. This is the glory of God he chooses to.

In spite of their sin, he forgives them and he goes with them and he fulfills his promises to them. He comes to them and shows them mercy in abundance.

And that's the answer to our predicament, to your predicament and to my predicament. Because I'm no less prone to sin than Israel. You're no less prone to sin than they are.

On what basis does he save you? On what basis does he come to you and stay with you when you sin?

[23 : 16] When you rebel? When you fall again and again? Not on the basis of anything in us, but on the glory of his sovereign choice to maintain his covenant through an outpouring of abundant grace and mercy and forgiveness. And perhaps as you come to worship, you're conscious of sin. Maybe you're not yet a Christian and you know that you're coming into the presence of a holy God and that your sin keeps you from him at a distance. And this is the answer for you. Let me tell you about the God of the Bible. He loves to show mercy to people like you. So venture on him. Don't come to him and say, Lord, well, I'm going to try better. Lord, I'm going to do this for you if you'll bless me. Just venture out and trust his mercy. You promise to forgive. Forgive me. Maybe you're a Christian and you're afraid perhaps even to come to the Lord's table because you're afraid he will reject you because of your sin. Well, don't try and clean yourself up before you come because you'll never make it.

Just cast yourself out on his mercy and trust him to forgive you when you ask him. Take heart. Have courage. Imagine a ship that's being put out onto the water for the first time and make it make a journey. And you just have to get on the boat and trust it and you venture out on it. Well, you can venture out on God's grace and mercy because he's trustworthy and he's still the same God. I want to finish by telling you about one event in history where God delighted to withhold mercy. He delighted to pour out anger.

only one event in history. And he didn't delight in the punishment as such, but he did delight in why he was doing it. And this should give you confidence to the Son of God becoming a man. And being put to death on a cross, a Roman cross, a cruel form of execution. And we see a period where where the Lord Jesus Christ is hanging on that cross and it goes dark because God withholds the light. God is withholding from this man any mercy.

He's pouring out upon him the full, the fullness of his wrath against human sin. And he holds back nothing. To the point where the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is crying out, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And God held nothing back.

He didn't delight to cause the suffering. But he delighted to affect salvation. He was told that because of the joy that was set before him, the joy of saving people.

[26 : 58] The Lord Jesus endured the cross and the shame. On the cross, we see a priest offering himself as a sacrifice for our sin. On that day alone, the floodgates of divine wrath were opened up to fall upon the Son of God incarnate.

And it fell on him so that all who trust in him will never experience that. If you're trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ today, you will never face a floodgate of divine wrath.

For there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For you, a people of God, the Lord has opened floodgates of divine love and divine mercy.

Now, we're going to stand to sing. Here is love, vast as an ocean, loving kindness as the flood. Thank you.

Time for this word. ... Just the floodgates of divine love and divine dislike of need and divine love and divine discourages as everything.

[28 : 26] On the other hand again, this one is very provides a special gift to life existem Jesus. Si, could then follow me through for years■ to bond and divine bourgeoisism. Just the symbol of God Bunny travel from death wow and divine touch. clip, he's just today so that everything will be saved ■ mean by the wonders of Vench ofHere Truth.

All in Christ of all in Christ's Laying, so much greatness is si de■il upon the grave. Does he add a diplomatic relationship I've got back to for years and divine use in. On the throne cave, between love and divine light time and evil, to be brought love the story of God is a one of sorts of death. You've forgotten beauty only, when that comes to life.