

Faith in a Merciful God (Exodus 33)
May 13, 2018

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Our elementary children have been going through a 3-year curriculum cycle going from Genesis to Revelation. It doesn't go through ALL the books of the Bible, but it does cover most of the historical narrative. The kids have studied Genesis and are now studying Exodus.

When I try to teach the Bible to children, I use the "5 C's" of the gospel (inspired by the past few years of VBS curriculum). It is a simple, yet holistic way to sum up the Bible while also revealing the gospel. The "5 C's" are: Creator/Creation, Curse, Christ, Cross, and Connection. Every book of the Bible can reveal these 5 C's. Genesis, for example, starts with the Creator and His Creation. But immediately in Genesis 3, we see the sin-Curse entering into the world. The Old Testament continues this theme of sin-Curse as we constantly see man's fallen state. However, we also see the Creator-God continuously who reveals His goodness and righteousness to people.

Moving forward to the book of Exodus, we have to ask ourselves...what is the intended message of this book? We know the stories, but Moses didn't write this book just to remind people of history. There's a greater purpose. Moses is teaching Israel: who is the God that they worship and believe in and what is this God like?

In the beginning of Exodus, we see God declaring who He is (3:6, 14). He is the great I Am. He is the God who, out of love and grace, fulfills His promises to all their ancestors. He is the Almighty God who was victorious in the showdown against Pharaoh and his fake gods. He is the God who delivered them out of slavery. He is the God who provided for them in the desert, sending manna and quail from the sky. He is a leader who is present with His people; cloud by day, fire by night.

In the chapters before Exodus 33, God establishes His covenant relationship with Israel (19:4-6) to which Israel responds with compliance (19:8). And then God gives Israel the Law that they are to follow. He gives them instructions to build a tabernacle and introduces the system of offering and of sacrifice. But what does Israel do right after God gives them the Law?

They disobey. In Exodus 32, we see Israel in their terrible sinful state. They make an idol – a golden calf. They break the one of the first commandments!

In Exodus 33, we see God speaking to Moses and Israel is reminded again of their God - the God of mercy. In verses 1-3, we see that God keeps His promises and He gives blessing out of grace (not because the people deserve it). We also see here God's holy wrath in response to the people's sin. He calls Israel a "stiff-necked people" – a phrase repeated in the Bible to describe Israel and their stubborn rebelliousness, unable to turn from their sinful state. God says He might even destroy the people if He continues with them. Even in God's wrath, we can see God's love through mercy. Mercy can be defined as God withholding His wrath upon the people. God shows grace and mercy to Israel. Instead of letting Israel experience His holy wrath upon them for their sin, He will instead keep a distance, but still allow them to enter into the Promised Land.

In verses 4-11, we start to see Israel's change in attitude as they turn back to God. When Moses goes into the tent to talk to God, they worship Him. This is in stark contrast to what happened before when they made the golden calf and worshipped that instead.

In the last five verses of the passage, we see God again pouring out His grace and mercy upon His people. And He is the SOVEREIGN God who chooses on whom He will have mercy. It's NOT because anyone deserves it. Moses mediates for Israel and reminds God that Israel is His people. He chose them to be set apart from the rest of the world so that HE can be shown as the only one and true God, the Creator.

In the book of Exodus, we start to see the foreshadowing of Jesus. Israel needs a deliverer, a savior, a leader, and a mediator. God uses Moses to fulfill these roles, but Moses was not perfect and sinless. For us today, we are also in need of a deliverer, leader, savior, and mediator. We can experience God's mercy and grace through the work of Jesus Christ who fulfills all these roles for us.