

## The Core Doctrines of the Gospel – 1

# Who is God?

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Many years ago, right after I graduated from university, I worked at a small church in South Dakota. South Dakota is a state in the north central part of the United States. It is a cold, rural area, with its own kind of beauty. It is famous for Mt. Rushmore, the mountain with the carving of four faces of past American presidents.

Each year we would take a group of boys from our church and meet up with boys from other churches. We would camp in the mountains near Mt. Rushmore for 3-4 days. We would go hiking, learn skills for living out in nature, cook on campfires, have Bible studies around the campfire. It was a good time, enjoyed by everyone. But I remember that one hike that we went on.

We started early in the morning and it was only supposed to last a few hours, but it did not quite work out that way. Our first clue was when the well-marked path changed from gravel to dirt. But still the path was marked so we continued on. Later the markings disappeared so we just continued following the dirt path. Later the dirt path turned to well-trodden grass that looked as if many people had walked there before. So we continued on. Finally we ended up with several of the leaders walking in the front, pushing aside the bushes and the heavy grass so the boys could somehow make it through. We finished the journey that day walking in a small riverbed, filled with water, that finally led us home. It ended up being about a 6-7 hour journey. We later found out that we had started in the wrong place. The hike had been doomed before it ever began.

**If you start from the wrong location it will affect the rest of the journey.** It is the same with our faith in God. If we properly understand who God is, then that sets us on a course of relating to Him as He intends. An incorrect understanding of God will result in numerous problems in one's spiritual journey.

A.W. Tozer put it in these words:

*“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”*

When we think of God what do we see in our minds? If we see the wrathful tyrant, then we will run and hide. If we see only a God of mercy, then we will tend to live on the edge of sin, trusting that God will turn a blind eye like a permissive parent and let us get away with it. If we see God as aloof and distant, then we will be content with periodic exposure to his Word and His people, but look for true intimacy elsewhere. If we see God as helpful but not really interested in our well-being, then we will be drawn to fixing our own problems or turning towards the world for solutions, only crying out to God as a last option.

Our understanding of God will either usher us into a vibrant, balanced faith built on the true character of God, or a misplaced faith that prays wrongly, moves towards extremes, and is directed more by biased understanding instead of the Word of God.

If we are going to know God rightly, we must start with His Word. His Word is a revelation of Himself to us. With this in mind, let’s look at Exodus 34:6-7.

In the preceding chapters we find this story. Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, the God of the burning bush, the God of the ten plagues, the God of the Passover lamb, the God who parted the Red Sea, this God, had come and set His people free from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. It had been miraculous and divinely orchestrated. God was now setting about His task of transforming these several million descendants of Jacob into what would become the nation of Israel. Yet, very early in the process the whole plan was almost derailed.

The leader of this massive group was a man named Moses. God invited him to meet with God atop a mountain named Sinai. While there God gave him two stone tablets that had written upon them God’s law. When Moses came down from the mountain with these stone tablets, he found the people worshiping a gold statue. In disgust Moses threw down the stones that had God’s Law upon them and they broke. In response God told them that he could go no further with them: *“If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you”* (Ex. 33:5). Because of their sinfulness and His holiness, if He came into their presence, they all would be consumed and die.

Now Moses had a very unique relationship with God. Exodus 33:11 tells us that *“the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend.”* That is hard to even imagine, but eventually God instructed Moses to go atop Mt. Sinai again to get a second copy of the law written on two tablets. We find these verses in Exodus 34:4-7:

*<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord. <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>7</sup>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."*

These verses of God declaring His own character play a crucial role in the Old Testament story of God. You see the influence of these two verses throughout the Old Testament. These words or portions of them are seen in Exodus 20:5-7, Exodus 33:19, Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 5:9-11, Deuteronomy 7:9-10, Isaiah 63:7, Jeremiah 32:18, Hosea 2:19-20, Jonah 4:1-3, Micah 7:18-20, Nahum 1:2-3, Psalm 86:4-5, 15, Psalm 99:8, Psalm 103:7-13, Psalm 111:4, Psalm 145:8, Nehemiah 9:16-17, 30-32. Many of the prophets quoted these verses in their writings about God.

In Exodus 33 Moses had asked to see God's glory and now God comes to be with Him. We seek the same thing, but often don't realize it. We chase after counterfeit versions of God's glory. The desires for romance, the thrill, the beauty, the security, the freedom, the innocence, are all but faint shadows of God's glory.

C.S. Lewis wrote that the longing that we have for all these things on earth *"are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."* Unknowingly, we each seek for the glory of God, the only thing that will truly satisfy the God-given desires of our hearts.

In verse 5 we read, *"The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord."* The LORD is not a distant, unknowable God, but one who has come near. The people had worshiped a golden calf. Moses had thrown down the first set of tablets and broken them out of anger. And yet God still draws near and pursues a lover relationship with them.

He is the God who seeks to be known. The LORD descended to Moses and proclaimed His name, His identity to Moses. He does not ask us to play a guessing game, charades or some kind of spiritual hide and seek. God pursued Moses and came near. For those who seek Him He promises that they will find Him. God now reveals to Moses His character.

Here we read about a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. It makes our hearts want to stand up and praise God. It warms our hearts. But can verse 6 alone be a complete understanding of God? It would be like a parent who gives good gifts but never disciplines their children. Would this be a good parent? Or a judge who knows the guilt of a murderer, but then lets him go free. Would this be a good judge?

Many people stop here in their understanding of God, only thinking of His gifts. They give very little attention, if any, to God's justice, holiness, authority, judgment, or discipline in their theology.

For a more complete view of God one must keep reading verse 7. Yes, God gives good gifts, but He, *"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 fourth generation."*

So here we find the divine contradiction that runs throughout scripture. A holy, perfect, righteous God who must judge rightly and who cannot let sin go unpunished. At the same time, He is also loving, merciful, and gracious. So how does this all work together? How is this contradiction even possible? How can some of the guilty get mercy and others not?

We need to look to scripture for more of these answers. Joel 2:12-13 answers the question in this way:

*“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.*

In verse 13 the prophet Joel is quoting Exodus 34:6: *“God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* Verse 12 now gives us the answer that we are looking for. Which of the guilty will receive mercy? Those who *“return to me with all your heart.”* In the New Testament we see this same idea in the word repentance. Repentance is the idea of turning. It is a turning away from selfishness and sin, and turning towards Christ. Acts 3:19 says, *“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.”* In Luke 24:47 Jesus teaches the same thing: *“Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”*

The guilty who return to God with all their hearts will experience the grace, mercy and steadfast love of God.

So what about those who do not repent and turn to God? Romans 6:23 tells us that *“the wages of sin is death”*. Those who do not trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness will receive what the justice of God demands. The unrepentant will be doomed to physical and spiritual death and spend eternity separated from God in hell.

But what about the phrase that says, *“visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”* Is it saying that we will be punished for our parent's sin? Once again scripture is the best commentary for scripture.

Ezekiel 18:20 tells us, *“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”* In this verse it is speaking about a son who has done what is just and right and has been careful to observe all of God's statutes. The iniquities of the father will not be upon him. But then who will they be upon?

We find the answer to this question in Exodus 20:5. This is the verse in the ten commandments that says, *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image.” “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.”*

God's grace is extended to those who turn to him, and his judgment is directed to those who turn away from Him. It is two sides of the same coin. The grace of God welcomes those who come, but His holiness demands that His wrath fall on all who will harden their hearts against Him.

### **What must a holy, righteous God do with sinful people like us?**

If we understood even a small part of the holiness of God this question would horrify us. He cannot let sin go unpunished. This would make Him unjust and unholy. He must condemn, but at the same time He longs to draw us near.

### **How can wrath and grace both be satisfied in the midst of a sinful people?**

Answer? **Jesus.**

Upon Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, the wrath of God was poured out and the justice of God was fully satisfied. The wages of our sin is death, and this sentence has been carried out upon Jesus Christ. He has paid our death penalty. The Father has carried out the duty of a just judge on Him. Now that the price for sin has been paid, the way is open for us to be reconciled to God. ***"To all who receive Him, who believe in His name, he gives the right to become children of God"*** (John 1:12).

We each stand at the crossroads. If we turn towards Christ, we are forgiven and saved. If we turn away from Christ, we are judged and condemned. This is the divine contradiction of the Gospel between grace and judgment.

Some are convinced that their sin is too bad to be forgiven. Others believe that they deserve to be forgiven. Some can't believe that God would ever let them into heaven, and others believe that they already have a reservation in the VIP section in heaven. Some are blind to God's mercy, while others are blind to their own sinfulness.

So what must we do? **Repent and believe in Jesus.**

In conclusion, Who is God? He is the Holy ruler of the universe. He is the One whose mere presence should consume a "stiff-necked" people like us. He is the ultimate authority, because He created us and grants life to each of us. He alone has the authority to govern how we live and how we understand the world around us.

He is a holy judge who has made a way to be saved. Today, repent and believe and receive and become a child of God.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What interested you most about this teaching from Exodus 34?
2. Do you have any questions about this teaching from Exodus 34?

3. *"If you start from the wrong location it will affect the rest of the journey."* How does this apply to our beliefs about God?
4. In Exodus 34:6-7 some of the guilty were forgiven and others were punished. What determined which received what?
5. Acts 3:19 says, *"Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out."* How would you rephrase this verse in your own words?
6. God cannot let sin go unpunished. This would make Him unjust and unholy. He must condemn, but at the same time He longs to draw us near. How can wrath and grace both be satisfied in the midst of a sinful people?
7. What do you think God wants you to remember from this teaching on Exodus 34?
8. How do you think He wants you to apply that to your daily life?