

The Lord still Relates

by Scott Grant

Remember how good you felt

An advertisement in the 1970s captured my fancy. The movie "The Sting," which came out a few years earlier, was being re-released. The advertisement included these words: "Remember how good you felt the first time you saw it." It resonated with me because I really did feel good when I saw the movie (probably because I was with a fun date). The advertisement caused me to think about the movie and recall those good feelings.

Exodus 34:1-28 seems like a script we've seen before. It is similar, almost identical in parts, to parts of Exodus 19-24, the section that records the making of the covenant between the Lord and the Israelites. We read the same material again in Exodus 34, and it seems like meaningless repetition. But to the Israelites, it's anything but meaningless. After entering into the covenant relationship with the Lord, the people quickly rejected him and had Aaron make for them a golden calf (Exodus 32). So there is serious question whether the Lord wants to continue with them.

In Exodus 34, the Lord renews the covenant. Although the people have rejected the Lord, he hasn't rejected them. When the people hear the same words in Exodus 34 that they've heard before, they know the deal is still on. For them, it's like being reminded of "The Sting." They remember how good they felt when the Lord entered into relationship with them, and they now know that, despite their grievous sin, the Lord forgives, and the relationship continues. The story offers similar encouragement to us: In the face of even outrageous sin, the Lord still forgives, and the Lord still relates.

When new details are given in Chapter 34, it often concerns the grace of the Lord. It is his grace, and nothing else, that enables the relationship to continue.

Exodus 32 and 33 focused on Moses' response to the people's rejection of the Lord. Moses makes a passionate plea on behalf of the people in Chapter 32, and he seeks to know the Lord intimately, as the leader of the people, in Chapter 33. In Chapter 34 the focus shifts to the people. In the wake of the golden calf, what of the people? Will the Lord forgive them?

The Lord still forgives (34:1-9)

Mostly, everything is as it was. Moses cuts out two stone tablets "like the former ones," and the Lord writes the same words that were on the previous tablets. Just like before, Moses rises up early in the morning to climb Mount Sinai (19:16, 24; 24:12), no man or animal may come up with him (19:12-13, 23), and the presence of the Lord stands on the mountain (24:16).

The first striking difference between Exodus 19-24 and Exodus 34 is Moses' calling on the name of the Lord. Yes, everything appears to be as it was, but the question remains: What is the Lord going to do? So Moses calls on the name of the Lord.

The Lord passes by Moses, as he did in 33:22. But something different happens this time: He proclaims his name: "The Lord, the Lord God." The name of a person was very important in Hebrew thought. It was an expression of the person's nature. The Lord is holy, righteous and just. So when the people hear that the Lord proclaimed his name to Moses, they are probably bracing for the end. They may be thinking that this holy, righteous God will want nothing more to do with this rebellious people.

But what does the Lord say? He proclaims, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." When the Lord reveals himself, he reveals his compassion, his grace, his love, his faithfulness, his disposition to forgive. He has said things like this before to the people, but not this comprehensively. For example, in 20:6 he said he "showed" lovingkindness; now he is "abounding" in it.

The Lord forgives "iniquity, transgression and sin." That about covers it, doesn't it? Lest there be any doubt, the Lord says he not only forgives "sin" but "iniquity" and "transgression" as well. He's telling the people, "No question about it; I forgive sin." Any sin. All sin. Even the sin that throws a golden calf in his face.

What has changed? Has the Lord's grace quotient increased? No. It's the people who have changed. They demanded the golden calf. So the Lord responds not by destroying them, as might be expected, but by extending grace. The grace was there all along, of course; it just took some outrageous sin for the people to see it. As Paul says, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). Where there is no sin, grace cannot be seen. That means that the Lord will use our sin to show us his grace. Thus, all things, even our sins, really do work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28).

This isn't just grace; this is phenomenal grace. The Apostle Paul talks about "the glory of his grace" (Ephesians 1:6) and "the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us" (Ephesians 1:7-8).

Yet, sin has an effect. God is gracious; God forgives; God even uses our sin for good; but sin has consequences. He tells Moses, just as he did before, that sin affects future generations (20:5). The reason for this is to inspire the Israelites not to start a chain of sin that will link up with future generations and to inspire those affected by the sin of previous generations to break the chain. We can be similarly inspired. So the Israelites can be thankful for this warning, and we can too. Thankfully, the Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:4-13). Thus, the Lord's discipline is not incompatible with his grace; in fact, it is an expression of his grace. If the Lord were not gracious, he would not discipline.

In response to such grace, Moses quickly bows low to the ground and worships. He is blown away by God's grace. If God's grace doesn't similarly impact us, we have not begun to understand it. We have all thrown our own golden calves in God's face. We have all made thousands of decisions to reject his will for our lives, and we make such decisions each day. "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside; together they have become useless; there is none who does good; there is not even one" (Romans 3:10-12). Perhaps we are too mired in self-absorbed efforts to be good or self-absorbed "mourning" over our sinful states to look up and see God's grace. Whatever the motivation, we have resisted not only God but his grace, which would bathe us in forgiveness if we'd only step into it. But we're too afraid. Anything that we're not familiar with can be terrifying, and God's grace is a grace with which we are not familiar.

But Moses responds to it. If the Lord says he forgives sin, Moses will pray accordingly. He prays that the Lord would pardon the people's sin.

Charles Colson tells of visiting a rehabilitation center in San Jose dos Campos, Brazil. Last summer, when visiting the city, Ken Fong, Irene Dashler and I received the same tour, but because we had already heard of Colson's experience, we were not as deeply impacted as he was. He says, "They called it Humaita, and their plan was to run it on Christian principles. The prison has only two full-time staff; the rest of the work is done by inmates. ... Humaita has an astonishing record. Its recidivism rate is 4 percent compared to 75 percent in the rest of Brazil and the United States. How is all this possible? I saw the answer when my guide escorted me to the notorious punishment cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key into the lock, he paused and asked, 'Are you sure you want to go in?' 'Of course,' I replied impatiently. 'I've been in isolation cells all over the world.' Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates -- the prisoner Jesus hanging on the cross. 'He's doing time for the all the rest of us,' my guide said softly."

Such is God's grace. We deserve something worse than the torture cell -- we deserve hell. But God gave us

Jesus, who took our place on the cross. He absorbed God's wrath for our golden calves. God's grace is immense. No matter how far we've run, we haven't outrun God's grace. No matter how much we've sinned, we haven't outsinned God's grace. No matter what you've thought, no matter what you've said, no matter what you've done, it isn't too much for God's grace. He forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. You name it; he forgives it. He is the God of second chances.

So Moses asks for forgiveness. But that is not an end; it is only a means to an end. He prays first of all that the Lord would "go along in our midst." He wants the Lord's presence. This is relationship. And he asks that the Lord "pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as your own possession." The word used for "possession" implies "treasured possession," or "special treasure." Moses asks for forgiveness for the purposes of being God's special treasure. Again, this is relationship. We want forgiveness perhaps to feel forgiven, but not always for the purposes of relationship with God. We want to feel forgiven. Thus we place great emphasis on confession of sin and God's forgiveness, but forget that forgiveness is not an end in itself but a means to an end -- that being, relationship with God.

We have a good idea, based on the Lord's revelation of himself in verses 1 through 9, that the Lord will forgive, that the Lord still forgives, even in the face such outrageous sin as the outright rejection of the Lord. The bigger question is: Does the Lord still want relationship with Israel; does he still want Israel as his special treasure?

The Lord still relates (34:10-28)

Moses prays for forgiveness and for continued relationship with the Lord. What is the answer? Where is the answer? We read this section awaiting the answer, and at the conclusion we ask, "Did I miss something here?" But the answer here is "yes." The Lord has forgiven, and the Lord will continue in relationship with the people. It's just an interesting way to say "yes." We might like things a little straighter. But to the Israelites, this "yes" is resounding. It comes to them from the Lord something like this:

"I'm going to make a covenant, just like before. I'll perform miracles, just like before. I'm telling you about my promise to drive out the inhabitants of the land, just like before. I'm telling you to redeem your first-born, just like before. I'm telling you to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the sabbath, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Ingathering, just like before. Just as I said before, use no unleavened bread, don't leave any of the feast until morning, give me your first fruits, don't boil an immature animal." Just like before, Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain (24:18), and the Lord writes on the tablets (32:16).

Just like before. All of these items were connected with the covenant. And when the Lord speaks of them, one by one, wave upon wave of acceptance lap up on the shores of their hearts. The answer isn't just "yes"; it's "yes" upon "yes" upon "yes." The crescendo of acceptance builds until the Lord writes on the new tablets the same words he wrote before. These words are the centerpiece of his relationship with them. They comprise his love letter. So, how would all this hit them? I picture them receiving it with an ever-increasing response of hilarious joy.

A modern-day equivalent of this scenario might go something like this: An adulterous woman returns to her husband and asks for forgiveness. The man looks down, but a wistful smile comes to his face. He looks up, saying, "Remember the day we met? Wasn't that the greatest? Remember when we used to go for drives in the country every Saturday? Let's start doing that again. Remember how I always said we should take a trip to Europe together? Let's do it. I'll call the travel agent. ... " Isn't that a beautiful way to say, "Yes, I forgive you; I want you back"? That's the way the Lord says yes to Israel.

In considering some of the elements of the covenant renewal more closely, we detect some differences from the first issuance of the covenant. And some of those differences point to an expansion of the covenant. In other words, the Lord seems even more enthusiastic about the relationship, despite the golden calf.

Most significantly, the word "covenant" reappears. The Lord made a covenant with the people before -- he entered into relationship with them. This section represents the covenant renewal. The relationship is new again. Our relationship with the Lord can always be new again.

The Lord says he will perform "miracles," just as he did in Egypt (3:20). The miracles in Egypt were the 10 plagues that enabled Israel to extricate itself from Egypt. But the future miracles that the Lord plans "have not been produced in all the earth nor among any of the nations." It's as if the Lord is telling the people, "You ain't seen nothing yet." The miracles he plans involve taking a ragtag group of former slaves and honing them into an army through which he will drive out the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. ... The list goes on. Victory will be amazing and complete.

The Lord again graciously warns them against idolatry, just like before. But in the middle of the warning, he adds something different; he says his name is "Jealous." Earlier he said he was jealous (20:5), but now he says his name is jealous. This is a stronger way of saying the same thing. His name earlier in this passage was connected with his grace; now it's connected with his jealousy. It is a good thing, of course, that the Lord is jealous. Who wants a lover who isn't jealous when you want to leave him or her for someone else? If there is no jealousy, there was never much love. The Lord loves his people to such an extent that even his name is "Jealous."

He also adds the instructions, "You shall make for yourself no molten gods." This is obviously a reference to the second commandment, which prohibits idolatry (20:4), but the Lord applies the commandment in a specific way. Why? Because this is the specific way in which they violated it, by making a molten god. The Lord knows their specific proclivity, and he graciously addresses it.

The information regarding the feasts and the sabbath is pretty much the same. The feasts and the sabbath all call for the people to recognize and give thanks for different aspects of the Lord's work. If we are to flourish in life, recognition of the Lord's work and giving thanks for it -- and for him -- are crucial.

Despite the people's outrageous sin, the Lord still wants to relate with them. Despite even our outrageous sin, the Lord still wants to relate with us. We may harbor the belief that our sin is too great for intimacy with the Lord, but it's not true. The Lord wants to be with us, and he always wants us back. That is his heart.

A lost son

No story illustrates this better than the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, commonly called the Prodigal Son, in Luke 15:11-32. When the younger son asks for his share of the estate, he is in so many words wishing his father dead. This is an unthinkable request while the father is alive and in good health. This is sin along the lines of the golden calf. Unbelievably, the father grants the request. The community would no doubt be disgusted by the son's actions. After the son squanders the estate, he decides to return to his father, hoping that his father will allow him to be as one of the hired men. As he was returning, no doubt an angry crowd in the tight-knit community would have gathered. How would the father respond? The father feels compassion. He feels compassion for this son who wished him dead! Then he runs to greet him. Before the angry crowd has a chance to get to him, the father runs. A nobleman in the ancient Near East never ran; he always walked. To run, to hike up one's loins and run, was to invite shame. Yet the father invites shame so that he may protect his son, embrace him and kiss him. The father wants relationship.

Our heavenly Father wants relationship. In the face of even outrageous sin, the Lord still wants relationship. In the face of outrageous sin, he responds outrageously -- with outrageous forgiveness, love and acceptance.