

Text: Exod. 34:1-17

Title: "Truly believing in the goodness of God"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction – The Christian gospel teaches that salvation from sin is by grace, not by a sinner's merit. It is received by faith as a free gift, not earned by works. It is based on the goodness of God, not on the goodness of man. It is based on the sacrifice of Christ for us, not on ours for Him.

The Apostle Paul was a minister of this gospel. As such, he confronted criticism that he addressed in Romans 6. Some had opposed his gospel of free grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. They had asked the relevant question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" In other words, since salvation is a free gift not to be earned, why not sin as much as I want and still go to heaven when I die?

Paul's answer is that true believers never want to sin very much. In fact, to ask that question and to live by its conclusion is to completely miss salvation altogether. It is to be someone who has never truly known the grace of God. It is to fail to truly believe in the goodness of God.

Paul could have cited Exodus 34 in support of his answer. It is a passage that arrests every professing believer who is living according to their own wishes rather than seeking God's will for their days. It does so with its own question. It asks: "Do you truly believe in the goodness of God, like Moses did?"

The Lord wants His people to truly believe in His goodness in a saving way. In Exodus 34, Israel is recovering from the golden calf incident, one of the darkest days of great sin in the history of the nation. We are sinners too, with our days of great sin, and what Israel had to learn from God's restoration of

them through Moses, we need to learn as those who often need a similar work of restoration.

Restoration happens when we truly believe in the goodness of God. Our passage teaches us that we need to truly believe that God is good to give us a second chance (vv. 1-4); that God is good to come down to us in love (vv. 5-7); and that we must believe in this goodness without sinful hypocrisy (vv. 8-17).

I. Truly believe that God is good to give us a second chance (vv. 1-4).

Illustration: We heard news this past month that the 140-year history of cutting granite at the Swenson quarry in Concord has come to an end. The quarry contained 100-foot walls from which gray stone blocks were cut to supply material for some famous places like the Library of Congress and the Washington Monument, along with our own State House and Concord Public Library. The family business began in 1883, when John Swenson started it. His descendant Kurt sold the business in 2016, and Birch Equity Partners, the new owners, have now closed the quarry and have laid off the workers. The quarry is located at a place called Rattlesnake Hill, and with the closure their employees must feel a bit snakebitten.

Application: Cutting stone factors into our account of the Lord's dealings with Moses. The Lord directs Moses to cut two slabs of stone for a second copy of the Ten Commandments (v. 28). He reminds Moses about what happened to the first slabs, which had been written on with the finger of God (v. 1, "which thou breakest"). In the Hebrew piel form, that phrase is intensified. Moses had not only broken the tablets of God, he had smashed them in his anger over the sin of the people, whose worship of the golden calf was a figurative smashing of their covenant commitment to obey their God. What Israel would be commanded to do to idols in this passage (v. 13), Moses had done with the original copy of the law

of God. Clearly, Israel had been snakebitten by a great sin, and Moses had reacted with a severe loss of temper.

James 1:20 provides applicable commentary on his smashing of the first tablets, "For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." This is true even when you are as upset as God is about the thing God is upset about. God's wrath is always the wrath of a still merciful, good God of grace and love. Man's wrath ordinarily lacks these qualities. Keil and Delitzsch: "holy love does not punish till sinners despise the riches of the goodness, patience, and long-suffering of God." This is not how man's wrath operates. We are ready to punish before showing much goodness, patience, or long-suffering.

And so, whereas God had hewed out the first stone slabs for Himself (Exod. 24:12), this time He tells Moses that, because Moses had broken the first two, He wanted Moses to replace them. Moses must come this time alone (v. 3), because God is ministering specifically to his need for restoration.

And so with Moses, the first thing we learn about truly believing that God is good is to believe that He is good to give us a second chance. He provides Moses with not only a second set of tablets, but also with a path of reconciliation to correct the damage he had caused to the first set.

If Moses needed a second chance from the Lord at times, we too need this goodness from the Lord. The promise of 1 John 1:9 was earned for us by our Better-Moses, who never Himself needed His own second chance. Because Jesus died for us, God promises, "If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." To truly believe in God's goodness is to recognize our need for that second chance, to truly desire it, and to truly obtain it through confession and trust in the promise of God. We must believe that God is good to give us a second chance.

II. Truly believe that God is good to come down to us in love (vv. 5-7).

Illustration: Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders of Arkansas spoke at the Republican National Convention this past week. She told a cute story about her four- or five-year-old son Huck and one of his visits to the White House to meet former President Trump. She mentioned how that as Trump approached, Huck went running right toward the President, who stooped down on one knee ready for his hug, only to have Huck run right by him to his mother who was following the President. In that instance, the President did the stooping, but Huck knew who was really the one who loved him – his mom.

Application – In our passage, the Lord is both the one doing the stooping and the one who really loves His children like Moses. He wants Moses to know traits of His love: compassion, graciousness, slowness to anger, abundance in covenantal, promise-keeping love [*hesed*; KJV *goodness* in v. 6 and *mercy* in v. 7], and faithfulness. This is His name, identity, and nature. This is who He is. He is good to come down to us in love.

Verse 7 elaborates on this covenantal, promise-keeping love. It is a love that both forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin, while it never overlooks sin's need to be punished justly. This love promised the cross, where God dealt justly with our sin while exercising the love that forgives.

The verse tells us how the damaging consequences of a man's sin can harm up to three or four generations after him. But it contrasts that with what the Lord's saving love can do – saving thousands of generations, those first three or four so affected and many, many more. In other words, “where sin abounds, grace does much more abound” (Rom. 5:20). The power of sin – to afflict three or four generations – is no match for God's power to save thousands of generations, including those three or four.

Do you truly believe that God is good to come down in love for us to save us from our sin through the sacrifice of His own Son Jesus Christ? Those who truly understanding this never want to sin more so that grace could abound more. Certainly, Moses never wanted to do so.

III. Truly believe that God is good without sinful hypocrisy (vv. 8-17).

Illustration: I met a new friend this pass week who told me that he did not go to church because he had found churches to be filled with hypocrites. I responded that churches are hospitals for sinners, not health clubs for great spiritual athletes, and hypocrisy is one of the sins we all need to have cured.

Application: The Bible tells us that man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), which assumes that the outward appearance does not always match up very well with what is truly in the heart. It also assumes that it is human nature to be tempted to be hypocritical.

We have come here this morning to have the Lord help us have victory over this temptation through His Word, as we learn more about His goodness to us and about how we must respond to that goodness by truly believing in it. We do not want to be a church of hypocrites (2 Cor. 5:12), and our passage indicates what a genuine and transparent response to a true understanding of God's goodness looks like.

1. We must respond with a humble confession of our own lack of goodness when we understand God's goodness (vv. 8-9). One of the objections attorneys use in courtrooms is the objection: "asked and answered." Moses intercedes again here for his people, and what he prays for has already been asked and answered (Exod. 33:1-3). But the Lord does not object. This prayer needed to be asked and answered again. We need daily to humble ourselves before the Lord, confessing to Him our

stiff-necked lack of goodness and our need for His renewed presence in our lives.

One of the blessings Moses asks for is that God would make His people His inheritance or possession. As God's people, we should want Him to own us. Paul prays that NT believers would have this sense of being owned or possessed by God. He calls our relationship with the Lord "the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18). Paul understood that every true local church is the flock of God, which He has purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

2. We must respond to God's goodness with an obedient testimony of trust in His power to defeat our enemies (vv. 10-11). Our God desires to display His power through His people (v. 10, "and all the people . . . shall see the work of the Lord"). That display, however, always depends on whether His people maintain an obedient testimony of trust in His power.

Matt. 13:58, "And He [Jesus] did not many mighty works there [Nazareth, His hometown] because of their unbelief." Failure to be faithful obediently to God's commands results in our failure to display His power to the many in our lives who need to see it.

There are two pillars to this obedience, which are laid out by the rest of the chapter – holy lives and holy worship. The first will lead us to the second.

3. We must respond with holy lives that lead to holy worship (vv. 12-17). The commands of verses 11 and 12 are two different forms of the same word. In verse 11, the first form (qal) means *watch* or *guard*. We could translate, "Watch for yourself what I am commanding you today." In verse 12, the second form (niphal) is used, I believe, because it can mean *be watched* or *be guarded* ("Be watched for yourself"). I think the difference is that in verse 12 the Lord is emphasizing that we must

watch and guard one another when it comes to living holy lives that lead to holy worship. This togetherness is indicated also by the switch to the plural *ye* in v. 13.

What we must do together to live holy lives and worship in a holy way is avoid the influence of the sinful world we find ourselves in (vv. 12-13). This need for holiness is caused by the jealousy God possesses in view of His covenant-love for His people (vv. 14-15).

Marriage within the true faith is important in this regard, because our covenant relationship with the Lord is just like a marriage covenant relationship (v. 16). Ideally, our marriage relationship should support our relationship to the Lord, not compete with it.

For this reason, the worship of other false gods is called adultery in our passage. Our NTs say the same thing about befriending the world on their terms: “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4).

Of course, the Lord Jesus befriended sinners, as we must, but He never did so on their terms. He did so on the Lord’s terms, which are the terms of the Great Commission, that we should help the lost become disciples who follow Jesus Christ. He would eat a meal with publicans, but He did so at their house and not in their pagan temple, and I am sure that He thanked His Father for His food before partaking. When we befriend the world on their terms, we violate our covenant of love with our Lord, who is jealous for us as His bride.

Conclusion: The last verse of our passage reminds us of Israel’s great sin (v. 17). The good news of what has preceded in our chapter is that God’s goodness is greater than our great

sins. Truly believing this means believing in a second chance from One who stoops down in love to save us from our sin.

It also means being so overcome by that loving goodness that we humbly confess our own lack of goodness, wanting Him to own us in spite of ourselves. It means that we endeavor to maintain an obedient testimony, trusting His power to defeat our enemies, and that we seek to live holy lives that lead to holy worship, very different from the world around us. Those who truly see God's goodness as Moses did never conclude that they can continue in sin because grace abounds. If you are living that way, our text has a question for you: "Have you truly believed in the goodness of God?" "Do you really know what it is?"

If you must honestly answer "No" to those questions, Moses has left us with a wonderful prayer we can pray to experience this real, life-changing faith: "Lord, pardon my iniquity and my sin, and take me for your inheritance" (v. 9).

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*