

Can God be close to pig-headed people?

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[0 : 01] Well, our reading tonight is on page 73 of the Church Bibles. That's Exodus chapter 33, right through to Exodus 34 verse 10.

I'll read from the beginning of chapter 33. The Lord said to Moses, depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, to your offspring, I will give it.

I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hevites and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, say to the people of Israel, you are a stiff-necked people.

If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you. Therefore, the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mount Horeb onwards.

[1 : 37] Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp. And he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.

Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door and watch Moses until he'd gone into the tent.

When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance to the tent. And the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.

Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant, Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Moses said to the Lord, see, you say to me, bring up this people. But you've not let me know who you'll send with me. Yet you have said, I know you by name.

[2 : 52] And you also have found favor in my sight. Now, therefore, if I found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight.

Consider to that this nation is your people. And he said, my presence will go with you.

That's Moses, you singular. And I will give you rest. And he said to him, if your presence will not go with me or better, if your presence will not go with us, do not bring us up from here.

For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight? I and your people. Is it not in your going with us so that we're distinct? I and your people from every other people on the face of the earth.

And the Lord said to Moses, this very thing that you have spoken, I will do for you have found favor in my sight. And I know you by name.

[3 : 58] Moses said, please show me your glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before you. And I'll proclaim before you my name, the Lord, Yahweh, that is.

And I'll be gracious to whom I will be gracious. And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But he said, you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live.

And the Lord said, behold, there's a place by me where you shall stand on the rock. And while my glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I've passed by.

Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back. But my face shall not be seen. The Lord said to Moses, cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first.

And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain.

[5 : 08] No one shall come up with you and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze upon that mountain. So Moses cuts 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 he took in his hand two tablets of stone. The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name Yahweh.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

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 fourth generation.

And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth and worshipped. And he said, if now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us.

[6 : 26] For it is a stiff necked people. And pardon our iniquity and sin and take us for your inheritance. And he said, behold, I'm making a covenant before all your people.

I will do marvels such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord.

For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. Well, it would be a great help if you would turn back to Exodus chapter 33, page 73 in the Visitor's Bibles.

And let's pray. All our knowledge, sense and sight lie in deepest darkness shrouded till your spirit breaks our night with the light of truth unclouded.

Father God, through tired minds and difficult truths and a human preacher, would you speak to us now by your spirit? And so lead us to your son.

[7 : 42] Amen. Well, there are a few things which hit us with that horrible pit of the stomach feeling quite so hard as a fractured friendship.

That dreadful realization that we have said or done something or betrayed a trust and it's caused real and lasting damage to a relationship.

And that no matter what you do now, the friendship will always be that little bit more fragile. Things have changed. And they'll never quite be the same again.

And what feels even worse for anyone with even just a shred of self-awareness is knowing that the real problem is something inside of us.

This is what we're actually like. And some people are just not nice to be around. And in those brief moments, we realize that may just go for me.

- [8 : 54] So just for an instant, we glimpse the full pig-headed, unattractive truth about ourselves. And we don't even like our own company very much.
- How many of us could bear to listen in while our work colleagues describe just how enjoyable we really are to spend time with? There are some questions we just don't really want a truthful answer to, aren't there?
- And those are the questions which loom in the background of Exodus 33 and 4. Can God be close to spiteful, obstinate, pig-headed people?
- Could a good God actually take a people like this to be his own forever? And if that is not a question you've ever asked, then this is not a passage for you.
- But I suspect there are very few Christians in this room who don't know enough about themselves to wonder why the Lord would want us in his heaven.
- [10 : 06] And if that is you, then there's a massive reassurance for you here. And it's all the more real because this passage is real and honest about the problem.
- The first thing we learn in chapter 33, verses 1 to 11, is that what we are like puts God disastrously far away. Verse 3, carry on towards the promised land, but I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people.
- Verse 4, when they heard this disastrous word, they mourned. 34, verse 9, right at the other end of our passage.
- Please, Lord, go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people. An alpaca is 60 kilograms worth of camel crossed with Kashmir goat.
- And it is the perfect example of a stiff-necked creature. It has the brains of a sheep, the stubbornness of a mule, and if you get too close, it spits regurgitated grass in your face.
- [11 : 15] And the question I ask myself, summer after summer, as a trainee vet earning pocket money on an alpaca farm, is why on earth anyone would want to get close to a creature like that?
- But what makes this illustration so offensive is that Israel was not a nation of senseless animals. The book began the way a best love story might, with the Lord swooping down to rescue her from captivity in Egypt.
- She was his special people. And yet, just a chapter back in Exodus, she did something absolutely unthinkable. Right as her rescuer was spelling out the terms of his gracious relationship to Moses, Israel was busily trying to replace him.
- They wanted a pocket-sized God that they could keep close to them and domesticate. And so they faked one. They manufactured a golden calf and pretended it was actually their redeemer.
- Well, that's spitting in the face, isn't it? A deliberate, calculated, corporate act of defiance. And the irony is it cost them the one thing they wanted, a God who could be close to them.
- [12 : 43] The feeling which runs through these first 11 verses of chapter 33 is that uncomfortable, pit-of-your-stomach sense of estrangement.
- Suddenly, God is far away. And they know that they broke the relationship. And there's no power at all in them to make it go back to how it was.
- Just look at how the writing drives that home. Depart is the first word out of the Lord's mouth. And although God isn't going to forsake his promises, he's still giving them the land.
- Nothing is quite the same now. That sense of distance and longing is only ramped up further from verse 7 onwards. You see, up until now, all the focus in this book has been on the tabernacle.

You couldn't miss it, even if, like many of us, it's the bit of Exodus you've been skimming over in your quiet times. For seven long chapters, God spelt out how he would dwell right in the middle of the camp, right alongside his people.

[13 : 57] That's what the Ark of the Covenant and the tent and the priests and the sacrifices were all about. But suddenly in verse 7, there's a different tent.

And in case we miss it, we're told twice in one verse that it's outside the camp, far off from the people. And it's only Moses now who's able to meet with God.

The rest of them have to watch wistfully, verse 8, while Moses goes out, far off, to speak to him. Only he, verse 11, has any meaningful fellowship.

It almost makes it worse, doesn't it? While everyone else is far away, Moses is left alone to speak to God like a friend, face to face.

So you see what's happened. One side has broken the relationship, and from now on it is complicated and remote and always mediated by a third party.

[15 : 02] It seems as if the whole tabernacle project is off. Because, verse 5, even if for a single moment this good God came too close, he would ruin them.

That's a problem, isn't it? And the worst thing is that although we can recognize the truth about ourselves, we can't make the consequences of who we are and what we've done simply go away.

So, verse 4, they realize just how disastrously far away God must now be. And all they can do is strip off their ornaments and mourn.

You can almost plot the health of Israel's relationship with God through those jewels and ornaments. My guess is they were the plunder they were given as they made their escape from the Egyptians.

So they only had these ornaments in the first place as tokens of God's grace. And if you remember, it was those same gifts of grace which they melted down into that little golden godlet.

[16 : 16] So now it makes them sick to wear them. I suppose if I'd ruined my marriage by betraying my wife, it would make me pretty sick to keep wearing this wedding ring.

But the one thing I just wouldn't be able to do is make it all better. So how on earth is this ever going to be put right? If it's what we're like deep down that puts God so disastrously far away, can that relationship ever be fixed?

Well, it means that secondly, as we'll see in verses 12 to 17, only somebody close to God can plead our case.

There comes a point when a relationship breaks down that any direct communication between the two sides only makes things worse. And when things are that strained and difficult, often the only option left is to find a go-between.

You need somebody that both sides know and trust. Somebody close enough to both of you that when they speak hard truths, there's a chance you'll listen.

[17 : 34] And what we see in this middle section is Moses pressing his friendship with God to the very limit for the sake of Israel.

He uses that extraordinary face-to-face relationship to fight Israel's corner with the Lord. And it's incredibly bold, isn't it?

In fact, this is the third time since Golden Calf Gate that he's stood in between the two sides. But Israel desperately needs a mediator. And there's nobody else who can do it.

Now, if we're going to get our heads around this passage, we need to think a little bit about how mediation works. Thankfully, it's not often that most of us need to resort to an advocate in everyday life, is it?

But that means that we're not all that familiar with a process right at the heart of the Christian gospel. And the key to understanding it is a word which I'm sure you've noticed already because it runs through this middle paragraph like a dripping tap.

[18 : 40] It's the word favor. It's used twice as often right here as in the whole rest of the book. A word that describes a powerful person stooping down to look kindly on a weaker person, someone who needs his help.

It's the Old Testament word which gives us the concept of grace. Now, what does that have to do with a mediator going to fight our corner?

Well, it's the basis on which Moses' whole case rests. He personally has found favor, grace with God.

And now he's going to plead for his people on the basis of his own relationship. It's as if he's saying to God, be gracious to them because you're gracious to me.

I am your friend and they are my friends. So please don't just be with me. Be all of our Lord. Just look how boldly Moses steps in to plead that case.

[19 : 54] He opens verse 12 by saying something like, now look here, Lord. See, you say to me, bring up this people, but you've not let me know who you'll send with me.

That's not quite true, is it? God had said in verse 2, he'd send an angel in his place. But Moses knows that's just not enough. Without God's presence with them, well, his people have absolutely nothing.

He says as much at the end of verse 16. It's only God himself going with them that makes Israel distinct from every other people on the earth.

You see, knowing God and living in relationship with him is the great fault line that runs right the way through humanity. It's what divides our entire race in two, isn't it?

Those who the Lord is right alongside, personally, and those who are far away from him. But what verses 12 and 13 emphasize is that right now, the only human being on God's side of that fault line is Moses himself.

[21 : 10] Yet God, he said, you have said, I know you by name, and you have found favor in my sight. And consider to, verse 13, that this nation is your people.

And what follows is a little tussle between Moses and the Lord as to exactly whose problem this pig-headed people really are. So far, it's almost as if God has disowned Israel, denied all connection with them.

Suddenly, back in 32, he was calling them the people Moses brought out of Egypt. But Moses isn't having it. Three times here, he calls them your people.

And how would anyone know, verse 16, that you've been gracious to me unless you stay close to them. That's a mediator at work.

Someone who pleads for his people's salvation on the basis of his own standing. Well, God's answer finally comes in verse 17.

[22 : 20] I won't abandon them, he says. I'll do as you ask. Why? For your sake. Because you, Moses, singular, you have found favor in my sight and I know you by name.

There is nothing better, is there, in the whole world when you've blown it and no one else will give you the time of day than to discover that somebody else is actually willing to put their reputation on the line for you.

when the union rep goes in to battle for your job. It's ultimately the one resource he has which counts.

His own standing and reputation with the boss. His personal capital. And when it's your family's livelihood on the line, well, you better hope that your advocate has the employer's ear.

So how does all this help in those moments that you or I have been so pig-headed and awful that we can't face God even to ask his forgiveness?

[23 : 37] Partly it reminds us that in the Lord Jesus, we too have a persistent advocate to plead our case with the Father. But there's something even richer than that truth.

Moses pleaded this boldly simply on the basis of his standing of grace. And in his grace, God was faithful.

But our mediator's standing is something even more certain. He didn't need to find favor with the Father. He was eternally the Son whom God loves.

So there is no breaking point beyond which the Lord Jesus cannot strain his relationship with the Father for your sake or my sake. His basis with God the Father is as sure as can be.

If there's one thing this passage teaches us, it's that without a friend to plead our case, then God's people have nothing at all. But praise God, in the Lord Jesus we have the best friend there is.

[24 : 52] Now, of course, none of that means anything at all unless there's a God willing to listen to mediation. And that, I think, is why this last famous section of the passage comes where it does.

We've seen that what we are, what we're like, puts God disastrously far away. We know that only somebody close to God can plead our case.

But the ultimate answer to the question of whether a good God can be close to pig-headed people like you and me comes right now in chapter 33, 18 through to 34, verse 10.

what God is like brings him wonderfully near. Now, in lots of ways, what happens here is quite familiar, isn't it?

Bits of this story have made their way into Christian folklore. So we sing songs like Rock of Ages, Clef for Me, which vaguely pick up on the language of the end of the chapter.

[25 : 57] But I think we have to admit that we're a little fuzzy on how the details fit into this story. Let's start with Moses' request in verse 18.

Please show me your glory. Now, why on earth does Moses ask that? It seems a little odd, doesn't it? He's been pushing his luck on behalf of the people, and the moment God agrees to stay with them, Moses hits him with another slightly out of the blue request.

Well, surely the answer must be that Moses wants reassurance that God really will do what he's promised. We need that, don't we?

Most of all, we know we don't deserve it. So Moses asks God to show him again what he's really like. Remind me how good you are for your word.

That's God's glory. It's a word which means weightiness or significance. And I think that explains the Lord's answer in verse 19. What I'll show you is my goodness and my name.

[27 : 12] I'll introduce myself again. Because if you grasp who I am, then you'll have all the reassurance you need. Now, it doesn't actually take place until the next morning down in 34 verse 6 when the Lord passes before him as promised and proclaims his name.

Moses, of course, is going to need some health and safety measures in place first. Even he isn't fit to see the Lord and live. In fact, by the time God has put enough protection in place, Moses won't actually see a thing.

He'll be hidden in a rocky cleft and then for good measure, verse 22, God will cover him up with his own hand. So though he'll catch a little glimpse of the Lord's back, it's what Moses hears which will really be significant.

Before we get there, though, there's something else interrupting the story. It's as if the writer wants us to be absolutely sure that God's covenant relationship with his people will be mended.

So in verses 1 to 4, as Moses gets ready for the morning, he prepares two more tablets of stone, like the original ones on which God had written the Ten Commandments, the terms of the covenant.

[28 : 35] But those original ones, you see, Moses had smashed after the golden calf. I suppose it would be a bit like throwing away your wedding ring. And no replacement will ever be quite the same, will it?

This time, Moses has to cut the stones out for himself. There's no pretending the affair hadn't happened. But nevertheless, the ring is replaced.

And I guess it takes on a new kind of preciousness because of that. And that done, Moses sees what he asked to see. Or rather, tucked away inside the cave, covered up by the Lord's hand, he hears it.

He hears in verses six and seven the closest thing the Bible ever gives us to a definition of God's name. The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 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 fourth generation.

There in one paragraph is the gospel for pig-headed people. It tells us that he is just the sort of God we need.

[30 : 07] because right at the core of God's nature is a heart of merciful, patient, steadfast love.

So from that moment on, what Moses heard would define how Israel thought about their Lord. It might just be the most quoted and alluded bit of the whole Old Testament.

because you see, to a people who had blown it so badly, that truth about their covenant God became the most precious truth of all.

The Psalms alone, Israel's prayer book, would sing of his steadfast love 127 times. And every time we see the word Lord in our Bibles, in capital letters, we're meant to think back to these words it represents.

That name, Yahweh, is simply shorthand for the steadfast covenant God who from eternity has been like this. Of course, reality didn't have to be like that, did it?

[31 : 22] The true God could have been a very different sort of God. But praise the Lord, this is reality. this is what the living God is like.

And that doesn't mean he's a God we can tame like a little golden calf. He's serious about sin, verse 7. The guilty there must mean those who refuse to recognize their shame, unlike Israel.

You can't plead repentance and still cling to your earrings and ornaments and little godlets. God would have a very short Bible indeed, wouldn't we?

The tabernacle would be off. Emmanuel, God with us, would be an arrogant pipe dream. So one writer says, it's only the revelation that God is compassionate and gracious that means the rest of Israel's story can happen.

And of course, our story too. Notice though, that even for Moses, real breakthroughs in understanding what God is like come by hearing and not seeing.

[32 : 45] His is an audible glory. glory. When you and I want reassurance about something, we usually want to be shown it, don't we? When I've blown it at home, I need my wife to show me that she forgives me and she still loves me.

Because I suppose humans can say one thing and mean another, but not God. what we have here in Exodus 34 is the most authoritative, reassuring promise that there is.

It tells us that right at the heart of reality is a God whose very nature brings him wonderfully near, even to disappointing, stubborn, pig-headed me.

And although I am footloose, he is forever steadfast. Although I can do nothing to make things right, he is the sort of being who is good to his word and open to the mediation of his son.

So Moses bows his head, verse 8, and worships. And he prays the sort of prayer that only someone who knew this God would pray. pray. He asks for God's presence.

[34 : 13] Please go in the midst of us, verse 9, even though we're a stiff-necked people. He asks for God's pardon. Pardon our iniquity and our sin.

And he asks for God's possession. Take us for your inheritance. Be our God and let us be your people.

God's answer comes in the form of seven more chapters about the tabernacle. The tablets have been replaced.

The festivals are repeated. The commandments are re-given. And yes, some things are a little different now. And Moses is always right there in between them.

Sin isn't just pretended away. But I am making a covenant, says the Lord. before all your people I will do marvels such as I've not been created in all the earth or any nation.

[35 : 14] For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. Can God be close to pig-headed people like you and me?

Well, only a God like this one. Let's pray. Father God, we admit that in our hearts of hearts, sometimes we just don't believe there's anything in us not to like.

Other times we're all too aware of our stiff necks and defiant hearts. And we thank you for showing us the truth. God, we thank you even more that you're a God who through Christ is willing to be near, even to people like us.

we thank you that your very character assures us that your nearness is real and not a fantasy. Help us, Lord, to treasure your presence with us more than anything in the world.

For we ask it through our great hope, your Son and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.