

# God of Second Chances

Exodus 34:1-9

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*3The Lord said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. 2Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. 3No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." 4So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.*

*5The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The Lord." 6The 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, 7keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." 8And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. 9He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."*

What word, phrase, image or experience comes to mind when I say the word *gospel*? What does that word—gospel—conjure up for you?

Gospel may well be the most used word in the Christian vocabulary. But it is usually left undefined. People use it assuming others know what is meant by the word.

I'm pretty sure Martin Luther and Menno Simons didn't understand gospel the same way. I know a TV evangelist and a Latin American liberation theologian don't mean the same thing when they use that word.

An evangelical theologian once asked me to define or describe the gospel in eight words or fewer. I don't usually think very well on my feet, but this time something popped into my mind instantly. I said, "God makes all things new" (Rev. 21:5). I don't know what he was expecting, but it seemed to satisfy him.

Here's another assumption many people make about the gospel, especially Protestants: the Old Testament is about law and judgment, the New Testament is about gospel and grace. Some Protestants take this even further: they say one purpose of the Old Testament law is to prove to us that we are incapable of obeying God's commands. The law, therefore, should drive us to our knees, seeking God's forgiveness through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I disagree. The Old Testament too is shot through with gospel and grace, with good news.

Look at the text for this morning. You'll remember when Moses went up into the mountain the first time to receive the Ten Commandments from God, the people got restless and asked Aaron to make for them an image they could worship. Collecting all the gold the people had, Aaron made for them a golden calf.

When Moses came back off the mountain and saw what had happened in his absence, he was livid. In anger he threw down the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, shattering them to bits.

The covenant with God and the people, which included the Ten Commandments, was itself good news. But now, the very basis of their covenant with God was lying on the ground in pieces.

But God gave Moses and the people a second chance. God told Moses to get his own tablets of stone this time and to come back up into the mountain. God would give him the Ten Commandments all over again.

God was a God of second chances. It was because of God's unwavering commitment to the covenant with the people that he was willing to give the people a second chance.

Here is the key verse from our scripture this morning: *"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (34:6).*

This is like the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. But there's a difference: this verse from Exodus 34 appears repeatedly in the Old Testament, whereas John 3:16 appears only once in the New Testament.

The key word in this text is *Hesed*<sup>1</sup> in the Hebrew, which is variously translated in English translations of the Bible as mercy, loving-kindness, steadfast love, faithfulness, covenantal love, loving faithfulness.

One Psalms commentary<sup>2</sup> leaves the word *hesed* untranslated. It treats the word like a loan word, a word borrowed from another language and left untranslated: kindergarten, e.g. Although literally kindergarten means children's garden, even small children know this word borrowed from German means a form of pre-school education.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hesed* is sometimes transliterated as *chesed*, because it has a guttural K sound at the beginning.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Eerdmans, 2014)

We use other untranslated words from the Bible like this: *shalom* (peace or communal well-being), *agape* (love or self-giving regard for another), *koinonia* (fellowship or deep communion). The translators of this commentary want to make *hesed* a common part of the Christian vocabulary. Can we make it a word we use at Berkeley?

*Hesed* appears 255 times in the Old Testament. It appears 130 times in the Psalms alone.

*Hesed* describes the very character of God. *Hesed*: this is who God is.

*Hesed* also describes what God does. Or more to the point, *hesed* describes how God relates to us: with unfailing love, kindness, and mercy.

*Hesed* also is the characteristic needed to sustain human relationships over time. It is what is needed in human community, especially in the church, for there to be harmony and peace.

Now I would be amiss were I not to say something about verse 7 in the text from this morning: God is *“keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

What gives here? Is God taking back what God said about *hesed*—about God’s mercy and steadfast love? Is God bailing out on us after all?

Not at all. But the stark reality is that we have to live with the consequences of our sins. I have a friend who was a longtime smoker who is literally dying of COPD. Now we can have a discussion whether smoking is a sin. But it’s a bad habit, and many people have had to live with—or die from—the habit of consuming tobacco.

Sins leave their mark on us. And sometimes the consequences of our sin get passed on from generation to generation.

People who study family systems understand this. In family systems theory it is called transgenerational family dysfunction.

After my daughter-in-law graduated from Goshen College with a degree in social work, she worked as a counselor in a residential program at Oaklawn for juvenile offenders. Most of the juveniles in this unit were sent there by the court, many of them charged with abusing children or more vulnerable youth.

I asked my daughter-in-law once: how many of these juveniles themselves had been abused? She said, Almost all of them.

As the old adage goes: hurt people hurt people. We tend to pass along our own internal wounds unless we find some way to redeem them.

What breaks this cycle of transgenerational dysfunction and sin? There are no quick fixes. But what is needed is the experience of hesed—God’s hesed, hesed in human community and relationships.

Remember how I began—with the story about being asked to define the gospel in 8 words or less?

Someone once asked Will Campbell a similar question. Campbell was an old-style Southern Baptist preacher. He wasn’t like the Southern Baptists you’re reading about in the news these days. He was a crusty old, plain-spoken, outspoken preacher from the South who spoke out about racism. A whole cartoon series was once created around him: he was the Reverend Will B. Dunn in the Kudzu cartoon series by Doug Marlette.

Anyway, Campbell had a friend who said to him: I’m not very smart. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?

Campbell responded: “We’re all jerks but God loves us anyway.” (I can assure you Campbell didn’t use the word jerks. Instead, he used an eight-letter word which starts with B.)

Campbell’s friend said: “If you want to try again, you have two words left.”

Well, Christian faith is more complex than that. Yet Campbell had a point; he uttered something absolutely essential to our faith: We have a God who gives us second chances.

I am a very flawed person. If you haven’t discovered that yet, you will. I need the hesed of God; I need the hesed of other persons and of Christian community.

We are a very flawed community. We too need God’s hesed. We need the hesed of one another; we need the hesed of this community.

Thankfully, we have a God who gives us second chances.

Amen.