

## Exodus 32 – 34:10 – What’s the big deal about Grace?

*Juliette*

Juliette has grown up in church and never doubted the existence of God. She thought about Jesus and his death and resurrection and decided she believed it. But something isn't right. She cannot shake the feelings of guilt she had from her years of living with her ex-boyfriend. He wasn't a Christian and for a while Juliette stopped going to church altogether. Even though that was long in the past, nothing can shake the nagging sense that there was something that God had against her.

*Jack*

Jack on the other hand, has never wavered from his faith. He's a well read Christian – the one with all the answers; he never misses a Sunday service, a prayer meeting or small group meeting – but he confessed to his friend that he feels cold towards God. Although he knows the facts, he has lost that first love, that enthusiasm, that affection for God.

I think the answer for both Juliette and Jack is the same; they need to understand grace.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that – and this is the shocking bit - saved a wretch like me. A wretch? In 21 century Sevenoaks we are brought up to have better self esteem than that – to call yourself “a wretch” means you don't think you deserve anything at all. That you are helpless. Yet if we do not grasp this central fact, we will never see what grace is and what it achieves

Jack has never grasped the state of his wretchedness before God – so he can't really understand what God had done for him. Juliette had feelings of wretchedness but refuses to believe God's acceptance of her is complete in Jesus.

Moses takes longer than expected up the mountain; their reaction is: “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us”. They wanted tangible presence, reassurance, so they look to the cultures around them and start to adopt some of their practices. They make a bull so they can worship it. For the cultures around this made absolute sense - the bull is the symbol and promise of strength and fertility. They turned their back on God in a way that should have brought an end to the covenant / special relationship.

On what basis can God have anything to do with the Israelites? With Juliette? With me?

### **1 As Moses prays he does so on the basis of God's free favour or grace (33 V 12 – 23)**

“If I have found favour in your sight” [NRSV] / “If you are pleased with me” [NIV]

The point of this passage is not that Moses think he's done enough that somehow he has earned God's favour – it is a request that if God would possibly bend down – to show undeserved kindness.

Moses is not relying on merit (he's a murderer). What are the implications of this? The song that we sang last week – refers to all those that God loves – including abusers:

*Fiery debaters and religion haters,  
Accusers, abusers,  
The hurt and ignored.*

This grace is shocking – it is outrageous; but this is the way of God.

God's economy is one of pure generosity, not something we earn – c.f Matthew 20 – parable of the workers. This is really important – because if we are like Jack - we think deep down that we have done something to

merit God's favour, we will not be able to properly understand, appreciate and respond to God, we need to understand that we have done nothing to deserve God's favour – that really we are the ones hired at the last hour.

## 2 As God proclaims his name to Moses & Israel

In chapter 34: 1-10 God explains his characteristics – the overwhelming statement is his steadfast love. This steadfast loving is unshakeable– it's a word used so tightly with covenant – committed, un-shifting, unshakeable, love. This love is linked to God's loyalty to the people he has pledged.

At the heart of God's character – is steadfast love. He doesn't have a short fuse. God as he declares himself is steadfastly loving to the 1000<sup>th</sup> generation. Until we understand this emotionally, personally, we are in danger of falling in the same trap as Juliette of never really feeling God's forgiveness.

But notice how Exodus 34 v 7 goes on to tell us that the LORD is not simply a push over. Grace does not mean that sin and evil do not matter to God. Neither does grace mean that his justice is undermined. He does not, God says of himself, overlook the guilty, or let them go unpunished. This seems to be a contradiction at the heart of God's declaration; how can he be gracious and slow to anger but yet proclaim himself the uncompromising punisher of sin. The story of the OT is where God's people reject him and he repeatedly judges them and punishes their rebellion and evil-doing – though in doing so he aims at winning them back to the safe haven of his grace. But this contradiction is only completely resolved at the cross of Jesus where Romans tells us "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." God has a genuine offer of forgiveness because he has painfully taken our penalty of sin. In other words, God's favour is made available to all human beings through the death of Jesus on the cross for sin.

How do we respond to this grace, to this unshakable steadfast love?

1. Deliberately practise giving thanks to God for everything - we need to constantly remind ourselves about the reality of being dependent on God.
  2. Practise doing good things that you don't have to do, as opposed to those things you are duty-bound to do. God's grace is a model of extra kindness.
  3. If you are stuck in a pattern of sin and are saying to yourself "I can't help it" – then catch yourself. Your focus is wrong: you can't help it, on your own. But the Bible tells us that is possible to say "no" if your mind is set on God's grace in Jesus.
  4. You need to keep going to Church and to Bible study group – even if you feel rotten to the core. It can start to feel hypocritical to go to Church. But that's the very opposite of the truth; Church is full of the undeserving – we are all in the same place.
- Can you relate to Juliette or Jack (or both)?
  - The Israelites made a golden calf to protect against an uncertain future. What do we do? Do we do this instead of relying on God?
  - We are often taught that we only get what we justly deserve - School Award, performance related bonus etc. Do we find it hard to accept God's unconditional love and acceptance?
  - What do you think about the parable about the workers in Matthew 20?
  - Are you shocked by the words of the song: *Fiery debaters and religion haters, Accusers, abusers, The hurt and ignored? Come to the feast, There is room at the table. Come let us meet in this place. With the King of all kindness Who welcomes us in, With the wonder of love, And the power of grace.* Do you believe it?
  - Which of the suggested responses to God's unshakable steadfast love are you challenged by?