

The Grace Of God

Exodus 19:1-19

I heard a saying once that God's love is like the sun but our love is like the moon. God's love is radiant and unending. But ours waxes and wanes. If you've ever been in love, you'll know this to be true. What starts out so strongly mellows and dims – or at least changes - with time. And it's not just our love - our patience can be like the moon, waxing and waning. Our happiness. Our grit and determination. Our commitment. Our trust.

As we've gone through Exodus, perhaps you've picked up a bit of a pattern with the Israelites. They've repeatedly swung between enthusiastic displays of praise for God and turning away from him in resentment. When things go their way in the here and now, they worship God and want him to stick around. But when the going gets tough, they turn their backs. The Israelite's response to God is so very fickle. Their love, trust, obedience and commitment to the God who has saved them and continues to provide for them is like the moon, waxing and waning, and is based entirely on their short-term comfort. Thank goodness we aren't like that!

The contrast between the Israelites and God that we see in Exodus could not be greater. A people who praise one minute and whine the next. Who trust one minute and despair the next. Wax and wane, just like the moon.

But then you look at God, who even more so than the sun is radiant, glorious and consistent. He is the God who'd made promises to Abraham and was deeply committed to keeping them. The God who had seen the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and set about saving them, who had heard the cries of his people and had compassion on them. Made promises to them and kept them. He'd set Israel free. He'd brought them out of Egypt. Led them through the desert. Provided for them every step of the way, giving them food and water in miraculous fashion. Despite the people's grumbling, despite their fickleness toward him, God had consistently acted toward them in love and faithfulness.

This is the grace of our God! Saving his people, pursuing his people, protecting his people, providing for his people – though they are entirely undeserving. Amazing grace.

And as we come to chapter 19, we hit a pivotal point in Exodus. Until now, the focus has been God saving Israel so that they could be his people and he their God, as he'd promised in chapter 6. The rest of the book focuses on how this will be possible. How will sinful people be able to have a relationship with an infinitely holy God? How will it work? What will it look like? And underlying it all, underlying the beautiful way God intends to forge and confirm this

relationship, to be with his people, to live with them and commune with them, love and protect them, is his grace.

The amazing grace of God, giving a sinful people what they don't deserve: a relationship with himself. And in chapter 19, as the beginnings of this covenant relationship are spelled out, we see God's grace so clearly. So, let's read the first 19 verses now:

19 On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ²After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. ⁸The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you." Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.

¹⁰And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹²Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. ¹³They are to be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain."

¹⁴After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. ¹⁹ As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai and set up camp there in the desert. And Moses goes up the mountain to speak with God. Now we've gotten used to the idea of Moses acting as mediator between God and the Israelites but his role is really brought to the fore over these next few chapters. Moses delivers God's words to the people, just as he speaks and pleads on the people's behalf to God. In this chapter alone, three times Moses goes up and down Mount Sinai, some 685 vertical metres, communicating between God and the people. Quite impressive for a man of 80! And in the verses we've just read, as we see God lay down the beginnings of his covenant with the Israelites through Moses, we get an insight into the amazing grace of God. It's a saving grace, a pursuing grace, a protecting grace, and a providing grace.

Firstly, we see God's grace is a saving grace. Verse 3 *Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

God reminds the Israelites where they were: slaves in Egypt. Captives of a ruler who did not care for them, provide for them or want anything to do with them beyond the labour which they provided under duress. And God reminds them how he saved them from Pharaoh and from slavery and saved them to himself. But this is not some kind of sterile transfer of property, as you'd expect if one king conquered another and took his slaves. There's nothing cold or clinical about it. God says he carried them on eagles' wings. It's a beautiful and evocative image that speaks of fierce love, of deep care and protection, of both incredible strength and tenderness. This is God's saving grace. And it's entirely undeserved. It's not in response to anything the people have done – we touched on this earlier. It's all God's initiative: *this is what I did*, he says. *I carried you. I brought you to myself.* Amazing grace that saves.

We see God's grace is a pursuing grace. It pursues a relationship with a stubborn and sinful people. We've seen them grumble and whinge and long to return to slavery, and yet God wants a relationship with them and goes to incredible lengths to make it possible.

I wonder if we fully grasp the how remarkable this is. That the one true God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things, immeasurably powerful, terrifyingly awesome in holiness, wants a relationship with a sinful people. And not just want but pursues it, though they actively rebel. The God who is above all things and must bow to nothing, chooses to reveal himself to them and come down upon the mountain as we see in v 18, come down to their level, that they might know him. It's astonishing humility. And in his grace, he offers the people a position of dignity that they do not deserve. *If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although all the earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* God says to Israel: you will be my treasured possession; precious and of great value to me. You will be a kingdom priests; living in my presence and shining my light to all the other kingdoms of the world. And you will be a holy nation, set aside, distinct and pure, my glory evident within you. In his grace, God offers the Israelites a relationship that will see them dignified, treasured, and set aside. Amazing grace that pursues.

We see God's grace is a protecting grace. There's nothing safe about a holy God. He's a good, loving and compassionate God, yes, but he's also infinitely mighty and just. A truly awesome God, who must be respected and revered. A God who is to be feared.

I remember as a child playing on a rock shelf on a particularly rugged stretch of coastline and looking up to see a freak wave, this wall of water bearing down on me. The ocean can be incredibly powerful and terrifying, worthy of awe and respect. How much more so the God who made it. The sheer majesty, power and holiness of our God compels us to stand before him in awe, reverence, honour and worship. He is not a God we approach flippantly or irreverently. Because though he is a good God, he is not safe. And so it's in his amazing grace that he provides a way for the Israelites to encounter him safely. In verse 10 God says to Moses *consecrate the people*. They are to set themselves apart from things that will make them unclean. Purify themselves, wash themselves and be ready. And because of his awesome holiness, there is a limit to how close the people can get to him and still be safe. Verse 12: *put limits around the mountain and tell the people 'be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death'*. God cannot be approached any old which way. His holiness demands utmost reverence and respect. And on the third day, God descends upon the mountain in a dense cloud with thunder and lightning, and the mountain billows with smoke as through its on fire and the earth shakes violently. It must have been an absolutely terrifying thing to witness.

And from the cloud, the people hear the voice of God as he speaks to Moses. And in his grace, God protects the people from the terrific holiness of his presence, so that they might encounter him and live. Amazing grace that protects.

And finally, in this passage, we see God's grace is a providing grace. As we've just seen, God provided the people a way to stay safe in his presence. Just as he provided a leader and mediator in Moses. In verse 9 we see God speak to Moses saying *I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speak with you and will always put their trust in you*. In this event, as the people hear God speaking with Moses, they will know that Moses is their God-appointed leader. They will know that his words are indeed from God. And they will trust Moses. In a sense, God places his seal of approval on Moses in the sight of the people, providing them with an intermediary whom they can trust fully. Amazing grace that provides.

In this event at Mount Sinai, the Israelites gain insight into the amazing grace of their God. It's a saving grace, a pursuing grace, a protecting grace and a providing grace. They get to encounter the God who wants a relationship with them and has done everything required to make that possible. All God asks of them is to walk in faith and obedience with him.

So how do the people respond to the grace of their God? Well, within 40 days, before the covenant is even completed, the people set about making an idol out of gold and worshipping this lump of metal as the one who brought them out of Egypt. It's a horrific scene. They reject the one true God. They reject his grace. And instead bow down to something their own hands have made. Just like the moon, they wax and wane. And their pattern of turning from God continues throughout their time in the desert, and the promised land, and throughout their history of judges and kings, the exile and return.

But God – God is like the sun. Never failing. Despite the rebellion of his people, his devotion to them, his forbearance and love and faithfulness persists. They are punished for their sin, but never destroyed as they deserve. God's grace persists. And then, at the very pinnacle of history, in the most astonishing display of his grace, God sends his son.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Just as at Mount Sinai, God reached out to Israel in an act of grace, so in Jesus he reaches out to each and every one of us, in unfathomable grace, and provides everything needed for us to have a relationship with him.

In Jesus we see **the saving grace of God**, who bought our freedom and gave us eternal life through the death and resurrection of his son. **The pursuing grace of God**, who did not leave us lost in our darkness but sent his precious Son down into our mess to rescue us. **The protecting grace of God**, that seeks to draw us from sin that kills and shields us from the wrath we deserve by the blood of his son. **And the providing grace of God**, who provided the way, the only way, that humans might freely come to him and know the abundance of life and hope found only in him.

It is grace. All grace. We do not deserve it – we are no better than the Israelites. We cannot earn it – all the good works in the world cannot grant us life with God. But just as he extended grace to the Israelites, so he extends grace to us through his son, Jesus Christ. Just as it was God who freed them, God who carried them on eagles wings and brought them to himself, so it was God who so loved us that he gave his one and only son for our sake, that we might not perish but have eternal life. There is no other God like this. No other God extends such amazing grace to pursue and save, protect and provide for those who might believe in him. How will you respond to the one true God who extends his amazing grace to you?

For some, this may mean deciding to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. If this is you, please speak with someone who believes in Jesus – whether that be a friend, or whether that mean calling the church office to speak to a pastor.

For some, this may mean continuing to pursue Jesus. Spend time reading the bible. Get to know him. Ask questions. Pray that God might continue to reveal himself to you.

For many of us, myself included, responding to God's grace today might mean examining ourselves. With God's help, taking the time to honestly look at where we are on our walk with him. Are we waning as the unique challenges of this time press in on us? Are we waning as we choose false gods over the one true God to fill our spare time, or distract from the discomfort we feel?

Our great God wants a deep relationship with each and every one of us. Only in him do we find abundance of life and hope and peace. He has revealed himself to us in our Lord Jesus Christ and extends amazing grace to us through him, grace that pursues, saves, protects and provides. How will we respond today? May it be that with grateful hearts we commit afresh to walking in faith and obedience with our amazing God of grace.