

Exodus 34:6-7 (NRSV)

- 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,
⁷ 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.”

Matthew 28:16-20 (CEB)

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NRSV)

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God on a mission. A pretty daunting thought!

We begin a new series this week, *Born to Run*. Before Jesus’ ascension, he had a few last instructions for his disciples which can be summed up in a single word: “Go!” Jesus sent his disciples out into the world to be his witnesses, to make more disciples . . . who would, in turn, make more disciples, and so on. Go. Send. Move. Run.

It is true that God has sent us, his church, into the world. But it is also true that the “sending” began with God, who *sent* his son into this world and who *sent* his Holy Spirit to the believers. God created this world, has seen this world torn asunder by human pride and rebellion, and has worked with unflagging will to put things right. God is a missionary God and we are the instruments of God’s agenda, what has been called the *missio dei*.¹

God’s mission to reconcile all of humanity to himself and restore his creation is grounded in God’s very being. John writes that God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16) and he means just that. In the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is both lover and beloved, a unity of three locked in love from all eternity, for all eternity. That is God. Our mission, as his people, as his church, must reflect the God who sends us. Thus, we’d best know all we can about the character of this God.

¹ I use this Latin phrase, meaning “mission of God” or “sending of God,” hesitantly. It emerged in the last half of the twentieth century and has come to carry a lot of often unhelpful theological baggage. Nonetheless, *missio Dei*, is an apt name for the God’s work of restoration and renewal, the story of which consumes everything in the Bible after Genesis 3. It is to this work of God that Jesus has called us all.

Knowing God

In one of the most important Old Testament passages, God's reveals his essential character to Moses at Mt. Sinai. God has led his people to the mountain and made a covenant with them, a covenant which the people broke before the ink was dry. Moses has persuaded God to go forward with his rebellious and ungrateful people and has even asked to see God's "glorious presence" (Exodus 33:18). Since even Moses is unholy and cannot stand before God and live, God tells Moses, in beautiful figurative language, that he will pass by Moses and protect Moses so he only sees God's back. God also writes on new stone tablets, as Moses broke the others in his anger over the golden calf. As God then passes by Moses, God reveals himself in seven Hebrew words (Exodus 34:6-7, above). Walter Brueggemann sketches the meaning of each term. Together, they are a staggering portrait of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son (John 3:16).

Merciful (רחום *rahûm*). Phyllis Tribble has effectively made the case that this term is related to the noun *womb* (רחם *rehem*), and thus speaks of the kind of positive inclination a mother has toward her child, a "womb-like mother-love."

Gracious (רחן *hannûn*). This term refers to completely gratuitous positive inclination, given without cause or warrant, unmerited favor.

Slow to Anger (אפים ארך *'erek 'apayim*). The phrase literally is "long-nosed." It apparently suggests that whatever "heat of rage" there was in Yahweh's anger has a chance to cool off, as it must be breathed out the long nostril.

Abounding in Steadfast Love (רחם רב *rabhesed*). Katharine Sakenfeld has shown that *hesed* refers to sustained covenantal solidarity. This formula affirms that Yahweh has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in covenantal commitment to Israel. In this context, the phrase suggests that Yahweh will "put up with" a great deal because of Yahweh's own powerful resolve to sustain covenant, even when the partner reneges.

Faithfulness (אמת *'emet*). This term is frequently used in a pair with *hesed* and is a close synonym. It witnesses to Yahweh's complete reliability.

Keeping Steadfast Love (*hesed*), for the thousandth generation. This formula reiterates the term *hesed* and assures that God's *hesed* continues to operate for a long time, and for a host of subjects.

Forgiving (נשא *nāsā*). The verb literally means "lift," which here means to relieve covenant violators of the burden of their violation.²

Before we leave Exodus 34, I need to speak about verse 7. The Hebrew word translated "visiting" or "to visit," *padaq*, is often, and regrettably, rendered as "punish." But it is literally "visit," thereby helping us to see that, generally in the Old Testament, the consequences of an evil deed grow out of the deed itself, rather than being imposed from the outside, as in God.³ A good example is Ezekiel 22:31, "I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads" (NRSV). There is a loosely-woven moral fabric in God's creation. Love begets love (usually!). Violence begets violence (usually!).

New Creation

One of the more striking moments in the gospels is when Jesus tries to reassure his disciples on the eve of his trial and crucifixion. Yes, he is leaving them. No, they can't follow him, but they will be better for it (John 16:7). God is sending another one after Jesus, a Counselor, Comforter, Advocate . . . better known to us as the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the Holy Spirit did arrive at Pentecost more than six weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. This momentous day was yet another sign that, indeed, just as Jesus

² Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 946–947). Nashville: Abingdon Press. I've abridged the comments a bit.

³ See Fretheim, Terence. *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Baker Academic. 2010. P. 50-51

had said, the kingdom of God had arrived and nothing would be the same. The old had gone and the new had come. Yes, the age of sin and death was still with the disciples, but there was no mistaking it, God's new creation had come. The disciples had been crucified with Christ and raised with him as well (e.g., Colossians 2:12).

That is the starting point in today's passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and it shapes everything that follows. The believers, then and now, have been reborn into this new creation and now embody the righteousness of God. Do you want to know whether God has and is putting things right – just look at the believers, Paul says. Look at them and see what God has done. Richard Hays takes us deeper into this:

When we hear 2 Corinthians 5 in the context of Isaiah's fervent prophetic hope for the renewal of the world, we understand that Paul is proclaiming that the church has already entered the sphere of the eschatological age. The apocalyptic scope of 2 Corinthians 5 was obscured by older translations that rendered the crucial phrase in verse 17 as "he is a new creation" (RSV) or -- worse yet -- "he is a new creature" (KJV). Such translations seriously distort Paul's meaning by making it appear that he is describing only the personal transformation of the individual through conversion experience. The sentence in Greek, however, lacks both subject and verb; a very literal translation might treat the words "new creation" as an exclamatory interjection: "If anyone is in Christ— new creation!" The NRSV has rectified matters by rendering the passage, "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation." Paul is not merely talking about an individual's subjective experience of renewal through conversion; rather, for Paul, *ktisis* ("creation") refers to the whole created order (cf. Rom. 8: 18– 25). He is proclaiming the apocalyptic message that through the cross God has nullified the *kosmos* of sin and death and brought a new *kosmos* into being. That is why Paul can describe himself and his readers as those "on whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Cor. 10: 11). 14 The old age is passing away (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 31b), the new age has appeared in Christ, and the church stands at the juncture between them.⁴

Knowing we stand at the juncture of the two ages, enables us to grasp that as we run the race God has given us, namely, (1) proclaim and embody the Good News and (2) build for God's kingdom by doing all we can to feed, clothe, cure, and seek justice, we do so empowered, encouraged, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

God's Holy Spirit dwells in all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who reshapes our hearts and minds. It is the Spirit who convicts us when we turn inward to the exclusion of others. It is the Spirit who works with us to foster an ever-growing desire in our hearts to proclaim Christ and to serve others.

Reconciliation

Thus, we are reborn, made new creations, so that we may be what Paul calls "ambassadors of Christ" to whom is entrusted God's "message of reconciliation." It is through us that God is making his appeal to an estranged and unholy world, an invitation to come, to be loved, and to be reconciled with God.

N. T. Wright has long suggested that the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is foremost about God's embrace of his people who have returned to him. For Wright, it is a story about a people who have been reconciled to the God who loves them, a return-from-exile story. One of the most dramatic moments in the story is when the father lifts up the hem of his long robe and *runs* toward his long-lost son. The father is overwhelmed with joy by the son's return. You might hold the image of that embrace in your mind and then go back and look at the portrait of God in Exodus 34:6-7. Who is the father in the Jesus' parable?

⁴ Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (p. 20). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

God's long project of reconciling rebellious humanity to himself began with Abraham and culminated on a cross near the walls of Jerusalem. God has chosen us to be the bearers of this Good News. Ambassadors of Christ.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this series are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Take a few minutes to read the Great Commission in your Bible (Matthew 28:16-20). Choose one or two words or phrases that stick out to you. Share these with the group, and why they stuck out.
2. What does it mean to you to know that Jesus has entrusted us with the mission of the Great Commission? How do you respond to this idea, emotionally and spiritually? Does this intimidate you? Make you feel braver? Why?
3. What does the word reconciliation mean to you personally? What do you think is the most difficult part of reconciliation?
4. What does it mean to you, knowing Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Exodus 32 The story of the golden calf

Tuesday, Exodus 33 God says he cannot go on with these people, but Moses persuades him otherwise.

Wednesday, Exodus 34 God reveals himself to Moses and renews the covenant.

Thursday, John 15:26-16:11 Jesus on the Advocate or Companion who will come after him.

Friday, Acts 1:1-11 Jesus tells his disciples their part in God's mission.

Saturday, 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10 The entire passage on what Paul's calls the ministry of reconciliation.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series: *Jesus Behaving Badly*