

Communion Saturday

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[0 : 00] Can we turn back to Exodus chapter 34? Last night we were thinking about the way that God reveals Himself, not to those whom Jesus called the wise and the learned, those who are full of their own wisdom, their own understanding, their own importance, but rather to those who are little children.

And so we come tonight seeking to be taught as little children. We come that God may reveal Himself to us, us to little children.

And Exodus 34 is where we're going to look. And let's read again verses 6 and 7. For it says that God passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

At the back end of last year, I was out for a walk with my two sons.

[1 : 54] They're 12 years old and 9 years old, Kenneth and Alistair. We were down in the south end of Skye, not actually too far away from where Bill used to live, at a place called Tarskavik.

And we were walking down the coast from Tarskavik, a very remote part of Skye, where the coastline is characterized by high cliffs and by very rugged, rocky scenery, and caves.

That's why we were there. Caves. They're not even marked on the map. They don't seem to be known by many people, but I discovered them in a previous foray. So we'd all come with our little torches.

And there's one particular cave, which I wanted them to see. The entrance to it is just about the size of the doorway there. It doesn't look very promising, but it goes back probably about the length of the church, so that by the time you get quite far back into the cave, it's dark, with that kind of thick, pitch darkness, that even when you've got the torches off and your eyes have got completely used to it, it's still completely, completely dark.

You just can't see anything at all, except the way you kind of imagine things sometimes in front of you. But you can't see anything. And we were right at the, as far as we could go in the cave, because at the back of the cave, there's about a 20 foot pool of water.

[3 : 37] It's not particularly deep, I don't think, but we didn't have Wellington boots on. So we could only go as far as the start of the pool. And the boys were shining their torches into the back of this cave.

And Kenneth said to me, Dad, there's something sparkling in the back of the cave. I said, you're having me on. I think his young eyes had got used to the dark quicker than mine.

But as we all began to adjust to the darkness, we could see with our little torches something glinting at the back of the cave.

And in fact, it was two little red, jeweled points of light. And they were blinking. So we realized that it was something living.

We wondered what it was. And at first I thought maybe it was a rat. And after a few minutes of this thing blinking at us, and us flashing the torch at it, we thought we'd better try and get a response from the thing, whatever it was.

[4 : 50] And we still couldn't really see very well, because the torches were just little torches. Now the thing was standing on the top of a pile of rocks at the far end of the pool. And so I took a small stone, and I threw it into the pool just in front of it.

And the thing reared up like this. And we thought, what in the world is that? It was quite big. And we sat there for a little longer, and of course the hairs in the back of our neck were, it's the only place

I've got any hair to stand up anyway, isn't it?

And we're standing up, and the boys were really very excited. And after a little while, the thing stood up again, and walked down the pile of rocks, and sat looking at us from the far end of the pool.

Now I told a story in Ullipool Free Church a few weeks ago, and there was a little boy at the front, and I said, what do you think it was? And he put his hand up and he said, a porcupine.

Now there are many exotic forms of life on sky, but it's not a porcupine. Well, does anyone want to tell me what they think it was? Eh?

[6 : 03] What about you boys there? Any ideas? Hmm? What do you think? What do you think lives on sky that could be this creature? Well, I'll tell you what it was.

It was an otter. And it was a big otter. Because otters are quite big, and I see otters quite often, from the front of our house just outside Kyle. And they can grow pretty big, and they're very imposing creatures.

And you don't want to mess with one. And of course we trapped it. It couldn't get out in the back of this cave. And it was only through waiting, and adjusting to the conditions, and watching, that eventually we began to resolve and discover what this creature was.

And sometimes, for Christians, God can be like something out there, only dimly seen.

Very indistinctly seen. We know His eyes are watching us. But what is He like? What is He really like?

[7 : 17] Our God. And if we're going to discover what God is like, then we do have to seek light.

And we do have to wait. And we do have to wait for Him to reveal Himself to us, just like the otter revealed itself to us.

We have to wait for God to reveal Himself to us. And this occasion here in Exodus 34 is an occasion where God comes out of the shadows.

Because Moses has asked Him to come out of the shadows. Moses has said back in verse 18 of chapter 33, show me, He sees your glory. which I think is His way of saying, let me actually see you.

And God replies, well, you can't actually see me. Because the revelation of all that I am to you would be more than you as a frail human being could cope with.

[8 : 27] And more than you as a sinful human being could bear. So, I'm not going to show you my whole personhood.

But what God does do is Moses gets a little glimpse of the back parts of God, as it were. Verse 23, at the end of chapter 33, God says, I'll let you see a little.

And it's just a kind of way of speaking, I think, of God saying, I'll give you a wee glimpse. But what God does do, and God does it very fully and richly, is He tells Moses about His character.

Now, in my job as a minister, I'm far too often asked to give character references. I don't like giving character references because it can become just a pain sometimes.

you've got better things to do. Not that you grudge giving them to people who you know will be great in the post they're applying to and so on. It just takes time. But there's a responsibility in it which I sometimes don't like.

[9 : 35] Because you are being asked to judge whether you think the person who's asking for the character reference actually is suitable for the post they're applying for. And you may not really, in the last analysis, be certain about whether or not they are suitable.

And so, writing, to whom it may concern, so and so is of honest character and so on, you sometimes feel, yes, but can I really say this is the right post for them?

Can I really say they have the character for this responsibility? This episode here in chapter 34 of Exodus is God giving His own character reference.

Because no one else could give a character reference for God. He gives it Himself. And the job that God has, if you like, the responsibility that He has as governor of the universe and as saviour of Israel truly is an onerous and awesome responsibility.

And what God is doing here in verses 6 and 7 is giving a character reference to say, I have this responsibility and moreover, I'm fit to carry it.

[11 : 08] I have the character appropriate to this responsibility. And I was struck by these words a few months ago.

When it struck me one day, do you know, really the most important thing, the most important factor in my life and in your life too is the character of God.

See, there really isn't anything more important. Assuming that you exist and that God exists, which we do, then the next thing that is important is what is your character like and what is God's character like?

If there is a God, then what is He actually really like? That's really very important, isn't it? If you think about it, it couldn't be more important.

The Bible describes, I think it's the authorized version, says God is the God with whom we have to do. He's the God we do business with. In our daily lives, we transact business with God.

[12:21] He provides for us. He cares for us. He is there when we call upon Him in prayer.

We praise Him. We listen to His Word. All the day long, we're doing business with God. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. And it's very important that God be the right kind of God.

See, if God is actually a tyrant, if He's capricious, we're in trouble because He's God.

And we can't do anything about what God is like if He chooses to torture us, if He chooses to make sport of us, we can't do anything about.

If He chooses to lead us along a path and then deceive us, if He chooses to let us down, we can't do anything about it because He's God.

[13:26] We can't do anything to change any of that because if God is not a good God, then He's God and He's Almighty and He'll do whatever He wants to do in our lives whether we like it or not.

And we've got no choice of it the matter. So we'd better hope that God's a good God. We'd better hope that God actually has a good character. And what this passage does for Moses is to reassure him about the character of God.

God is telling Moses, Moses, Israel, I am a good God. I'm not like Pharaoh whom you've just left. I'm not unreasonable. I'm not unpredictable. I'm not unsympathetic.

I'm a good God. God is telling you God. And that is something that we should all be profoundly thankful for every moment of our lives.

[14:43] We are in God's world and we found ourselves here. We didn't have any choice about it. We gradually came into consciousness as we moved through our early years and we gradually realized who we were and where we were and what the nature of our existence was.

And we found ourselves creatures in a creator's world. And as Christians we found ourselves as children of the heavenly father.

And it really is very important that that heavenly father, that that creator is good. Because we can't do anything about it if he isn't.

and he can do whatever he likes with us. So we'd better hope he is good. But he is. And this is the reassurance that God is giving to Moses.

We could spend a lot of time going through the words. Let's just do it very quickly. Verses 6 and 7. It's interesting the way God repeats his name, calls back memories of the burning bush, the I am, the Lord, the Lord, Jehovah, Jehovah, or probably Yahweh, Yahweh was actually the way it was pronounced.

[16:09] Meaning the one who exists, the one who is. And who is he? Well, says God, I'm compassionate. It's not a wonderful first introduction to God.

But what more wonderful word to have us the first word in a description of God's character. Now, the Old Testament uses that word in such lovely ways.

It's a word which relates to the womb. The womb is a place of care for a growing unborn child. And Isaiah 49 speaks of the compassion of a mother to her child.

Psalms 103, the compassion of a father to his child. And it's that word that's being used here. And it's the first word God uses in his character reference to us.

Saying, well, do you want to know whether I'm deserving of the responsibility of running the universe I've created? Well, let me tell you first of all, I am compassionate.

[17:18] I am merciful. I'm slow to anger. Slow to anger.

Do you know, literally, the Hebrew actually says, I'm long in the nose. You think, what? That's what it says. See, there was this understanding that when someone got angry, their nose went red.

And so, if you were long in the nose, it took a long time for your nose to go red. That meant that, well, we say today he's got a long fuse as opposed to a short fuse.

Well, this is what is being said about God. He's a very long fuse. He's very, very, very slow. I speak from personal experience when I think about it.

And as God, of course, He can actually perfectly understand and assess His own character. He finds this within Him. Forgiveness.

[18:31] And yet, if people spurn all of that, because of His integrity, His rectitude, His truthfulness, He can't leave the guilty unpunished.

It's our choice if we want to be punished, if we want to remain in our guilt, because here is God saying, first and foremost, I'm compassionate. I think I'll speak more about this tomorrow. But first and foremost, I'm compassionate, I'm forgiving, I'm merciful. But if you don't want that, then I can't just ignore your sin. And then He says that He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers.

Now, firstly, we must understand God is not saying He punishes children because of what the fathers did. Because He tells us that in other places in the Old Testament.

Ezekiel 18 is one that sticks in mind particularly. God says, it's not a child who's punished for what the father did. The child is punished for doing the same sin that the father did.

[19:38] That's what it means. And you see that in families, the way that children repeat the sins of their parents. Sometimes they suffer because of the sins of their parents, and then perversely, instead of saying, my father, my mother, were so bad to me in this way that I never want to do that to my own children, perversely, they'll actually go on and do the same thing to their own kids and make their own kids suffer in the same way that they did themselves.

And they will be punished, says God, not because of what their parents did, but because they do what their parents did. But, it's only to the third or fourth generation.

that gives great hope. It gives great hope. God doesn't say, this is not an endless cycle. I will just keep on punishing down through generations.

God says, I'll break in in grace. Even when people aren't seeking me, I'll break in in grace. Families will be just so hell-bent in their lifestyle, but I'll break in in grace.

I won't let it go on and on. I'll break in even when they're not looking for me. And I'll start my own family among them. So, there's grace even in that.

[21:09] And actually, I found myself praying as a result of these words at the end of verse 7 to God and just saying, Lord, isn't this a third or fourth generation in Britain?

isn't this a time when most people can maybe say, oh yes, my grandparents or my great-grandparents, yes, they were Christians or they went to church or whatever, but that's it.

And now, a generation which has nothing, and just saying, Lord, isn't it time for you to show mercy again? so there's even hope in this.

It's a wonderful character reference, and I encourage you to memorize it. It's not difficult to memorize it and to come back to it, to visit it whenever you're in need to visit it and think, well, this is what my God is like.

because I do believe that subsequent believers memorized it, and it's quite clear they did, because this is one of the most quoted passages in the Bible, and we often don't even realize it's being quoted.

[22:31] We've already sung three Psalms where it's quoted, and we can find other writers like Nehemiah, Hezekiah, Nahum, Joel, Jonah, the Lord's brother James, just to give some examples, are people who quote from these verses.

The character reference of God. The prophets in particular in the Old Testament, they were sustained by this. They lived in hard times. Hard times when there was lots of suffering, there was lots of evidence of God's punishment of people, and what kept them going was that they knew that God was like this, compassionate.

It gave them hope, and we need that hope today. We need to know what our God is like. We need to see through our God's eyes.

eyes. There are many sources for the knowledge of God. Some of them we take on board consciously and some unconsciously.

This is the most direct way by revelation, and this is the most accurate way to listen to what God is actually saying here and say, now, whatever other information I may have in my mind about God's character, this must correct it.

[24:03] This must be the standard by which it is measured. Because you may have thoughts about God's character that relate, or that arise from your sufferings, that arise from the way you were taught about God as a child, fatherhood, the example of authority that you've seen in your life.

And it may be beneficial that you had that teaching, or that you had that example, but in many cases today, and increasingly today, in what is often called the fatherless society, people grow up without any real clear sense of what a good authority figure should be like.

And they grow up with therefore very little understanding of what it means to be able to call God heavenly father, and to know him as a compassionate and gracious God who is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

They just can't see that because to them authority means capriciousness, it means maliciousness, it means exploitation, it means betrayal, and all sorts of other things which are negative.

And they attribute the same thoughts to God, about God, that they have about authority on a human level. And that can be a real problem.

[25 : 33] I speak from personal experience, maybe again I'll say a bit more about this tomorrow. I speak from personal experience. I had to completely unlearn what a father was and relearn it from the Bible.

because much of my understanding had been distorted in my upbringing of what a father should be like.

And some of you will identify with that. Those of you who don't, thank God that you don't. It's a great blessing to have had a good father and a good mother in whom there was compassion and mercy and slowness to anger, love and faithfulness.

Great blessing. But let what God says here override all your other sources of knowledge. This is what God is like.

This is the true image which banishes all false images. And Moses having learned about God in this direct way and having above all other people in his age experienced God and dealt with God in a very personal way is the man who gave us the commandment to love God.

[27 : 14] Remember Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 Israel has been addressed by Moses and Moses says to him, hear O Israel, he says, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

And then he says, this is Moses speaking, this is not God speaking to Moses saying, I want you to love me. God because in a sense that might not carry quite so much authority even though it was God speaking.

If God says, I am God, I want you to love me, you might in the cynical sort of way that we do as sinners think, why does he need to command us to love him?

But you see, it was actually Moses who gave the command. Moses said, you know, I, above all others in this world have got to know God. And this is my conclusion, he says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

What the Lord Jesus called the first and the greatest commandment actually comes from a man who has got to know his God, Moses, the lawgiver.

[28 : 33] He says, I love God, he says, because I love his character. I love what God is like.

What I have seen in God, I love. I love the compassion and the grace, the mercy, the faithfulness, the forgiveness of God.

I love the way that he deals justly. He doesn't clear guilt, but he's ready to forgive. He's merciful. I love it, says Moses.

I delight in it. And this brings us back to last night. Jesus saying, oh, thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, just for the way you are. I love the way you are.

Remember that word we saw last night, I homologate the way you are. That is, I completely and totally approve and agree and assent to everything that you are.

[29 : 32] I want it that way. I want you to be God as you are. I wouldn't change anything if I could, says Moses, and there is nothing more lovely, more lovable than you.

Now, surely that is the most wonderful thing for us to see in our lives, that God is like this, and that God is therefore worthy of the deepest love of our heart and soul and mind and strength.

We don't love Him because we're commanded to, we love Him because He's worthy of love. Yes, we have to love Him even if we don't see that, because it is a command.

But Moses gave the command because he thought God was worthy. He says, I see it. He deserves our love. And so, isn't it wonderful that as we've done tonight, just in a short and simple way, thought about the character of God, we found out once again that God deserves our love and that He deserves that we should delight in all that He is.

and that when it comes to finding out is He worthy to be our God? Is He worthy to be our Savior? Is He worthy to be worshipped by us?

[31 : 08] Is He worthy to be served by us? Is He worthy to be trusted by us as our Heavenly Father? The answer is a resounding and deafening and deafening yes, He is worthy.

He is worthy of our love. And just in the context of the Lord's Supper, doesn't that inspire your confidence and inspire your coming to participate in the Lord's table and just to think, all this speaks to me of the character of God.

Hopefully we'll think about this tomorrow morning. Christ, His coming, His sacrifice. It all comes out of the character of God.

It's all because of what God is like. God is like a God who wants to save, who wants to bless. And so, we come in love. We come in delight. We come because there is no one more lovable, no one more worthy of our devotion than is God.

[32 : 28] And so, hopefully tonight God has just a little more come out of the shadows, come out from the gloomy depths of our vision, and come out into greater clarity.

Because if He has done that for you tonight, you'll love Him more as a result of our meditation this evening. Because the more clearly you see God, the more fully you will love Him.

That is the nature of a Christian soul. It's not the nature of a non-Christian. It's certainly not the nature of fallen humanity.

It's not the nature of the devil and his angels. angels, but it's the nature of the angels in heaven above, and it's the nature of a Christian soul. The more clearly we see Him, the more fully we love Him.

The more we delight in the Lord's table, the more we delight in the church of Christ, in His people, in His word, in His fellowship.

[33 : 40] it's all good, because He is good. Amen. Amen. Amen.