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**Who is God? In His Own Words**

**Forgiving—Exodus 34:6-7**

When I first heard that I'd be following up a tribute video of those in our church community who died this past year, I was a little concerned, because I was planning to start today with a fairly lighthearted tone. But the more I've thought about it, the more I've felt that this is exactly right. It's been a tough year. Not only for families who have lost a loved one, but for all of us. There have been so many different kinds of losses because of the pandemic, and in that sense, we've all had the experience of grieving this past year.

When I think of grief, two things come to mind. The first, as you might expect, is the tears. Tears are an important part of our grieving. They reveal the depth of our love, and give worth and value to what we have lost. But the second thing that stands out to me is actually laughter. At funerals, people often tell funny stories, and they laugh together. And it's healing. This is something that we need in the midst of grief, and in the midst of all kinds of difficult moments. I know my family has felt this over the past 11 months. Laughter has been important for us throughout the pandemic, to get through those weeks that felt challenging or sad, or simply *meh*. Laughter has been so necessary that often we go out of our way to try and search out opportunities to laugh together. And it helps us immensely.

I'm curious to know what gets you laughing these days, or helps you get through a challenging time in a healthy way. I'd love for you to share in the chat feed. And as you do, I'll share something that has worked for us, and that is, watching funny YouTube videos. We've looked up funny animal videos—squirrel obstacle courses, fainting goats, and compilation videos of cats who are afraid of cucumbers (that is a real thing!); we've watched belly flop competitions; and most recently, our kids'

favourite has been a YouTube channel called Dude Perfect. This is a group of five guys who started out on You Tube making trick shot videos. And the trick shots are really impressive. Like sinking the world's highest basketball shot from the top of a skyscraper. They also use a lot of humour in their videos, so it gets us laughing. But probably what makes us laugh the most are their trick shot blooper videos. Because, for every shot they get on camera, there are often dozens of misses. I don't know why it's so funny to watch people fail (maybe we're just terrible people?), but when the stakes are low and no one gets hurt, and they are laughing at themselves too, it's funny to watch people miss the mark.

And if you had been driving along Highbury a couple weekends ago at just the right moment, you might have had the opportunity to laugh at me because I had my own little *epic fail* moment. The short version of the story is that I fell off my bike. And that might not sound like much of a fail. It happens. Maybe I swerved to miss a renegade squirrel crossing my path. Or perhaps my wheel caught a tree root. I wish that was the story but no. Here's the truth: I had stopped at a red light at Highbury and Killaly, and when the light turned green, I fell trying to get back on my bike to go through the intersection. For some reason, I tried to hop on from the opposite side that I usually mount from. I didn't quite get my balance, and I toppled over, hitting the pavement hard. The next day, I had the bruises to prove it!

Now, I'm pretty into cycling. Maybe you can tell because I talk about it so much—not as often as Pastor Paul talks about his grandkids though! But, it's embarrassing to admit that you fell trying to get on your bike. That is NOT supposed to happen! Thankfully, the consequences of my cycling fail weren't too terrible; just a few bruises to go along with my bruised ego as I sheepishly walked my bike across the street.

But as I've thought about these funny failure moments—the ones that have happened in my life, and the ones we've watched online this past year, all those Dude Perfect trick shot attempts that missed the mark, it reminds me of how imperfect we all are. How often we fail. How often we fall short or miss the target that we're aiming for. It's part of our human condition. And although there are times when the stakes are low—when we can laugh at our

mistakes, when there's no harm done—there are also times when our faults and failures, our sins and our mistakes, cause real damage and leave us stuck in painful patterns of brokenness. Thankfully, God doesn't leave us there. And that is at the heart of what we're going to talk about today.

Our current sermon series is based on Exodus 34:6-7, and we've been reflecting on God's character, described in His own words during an incredible encounter that Moses had with God on the top of Mount Sinai. Last week Pastor Paul talk about the tender compassion and mercy of God. And in the weeks ahead, we'll be talking about how God is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. But today, we're going to jump ahead to the first half of verse 7, where God says:

***Exodus 34:7a***

*I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin.*

Given that I started today talking about failure and missing the mark, it's probably not too surprising that we're focusing in on the forgiving nature of God's character. And I am grateful beyond words that this is part of who God is. I know all too well how easily and how often I can fall short. how much I am in need of His forgiveness on a daily basis.

In many ways, this part of the passage might seem incredibly straightforward—God loves us. Humans make mistakes. But God will forgive them. Sermon over. Let's pray....

Just kidding! As we spend some time with this part of verse 7 today, I think you will discover, as I have this week, that it is rich with revelation about who God is and the profound scope of His forgiveness. But to understand how truly incredible these words from God are, we need to make sure we understand the specific words that God uses here, and we also need to understand a bit about the lead up to this moment when God spoke these words to Moses. We'll get to the lead up a little bit later, but first, let's look at the words found in this verse. The start of verse 7 says:

***Exodus 34: 7***

*I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations...*

And I'll pause here just a moment to say that this description of God's love being lavished to the thousandth generation is really incredible. It contrasts what God says further on in this same verse about how God deals with the guilty—visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation. We don't always like the sound of that; it seems harsh, and it's tempting to just leave that part out. But there's a very real but important tension between God's love and God's justice that we can't ignore.

We'll delve into that a little deeper in the weeks ahead. But I wanted to just mention it today because, as we saw this week in the sentencing of Derek Chauvin for the killing of George Floyd, there are times when justice is needed, there are times when justice is what people are longing for, and there are times when justice is good news. And there are many verses throughout the Bible that talk about justice because it is close to God's heart. So God's justice is important, and we'll talk about that more in the weeks ahead. But for today, as we reflect on God's forgiveness, let's remember that God's description of generations that repeat patterns of iniquity that extend to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation is powerfully contrasted in the very same verse by this description of God's loving relationship with people being extended, not to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup>, but to the thousandth generation.

Ok, so let's dive in and talk about what Exodus 34 verse 7 reveals about God's forgiveness. God says here that He forgives iniquity, rebellion, and sin. It's significant here that God doesn't just say I am forgiving. Or I forgive sin. He says so specifically: I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. So let's take a few minutes to look at these words a little more closely. To get a better sense of these three words, I found the Bible Project's *Bad Words* video series really helpful. You might want to check it out.

We're going to work our way backwards through this verse, so first up is the classic s-word—**Sin**. The Hebrew word used here means to fail or miss the mark, an idea that we've already touched on today: a failure to fulfill the goal set before us. And that goal, which Jesus distilled down to two basic commandments, is to love God, and love each other.

All sorts of things cause us to miss the mark. Selfishness, greed, envy, pride. And in this sense, sin at its core can be described as a moral failure that causes us to miss the mark of loving God and loving others. What's interesting about this idea of missing the mark is that although sometimes we aim the wrong way on purpose, usually our misses aren't intentional. People don't usually make it their goal to be a mean, terrible, selfish, hurtful human beings. Usually we're trying our best, but we miss the target. And, just to make things even more difficult, often we're not even aware of the ways that we're missing the mark. Greed, or selfishness or pride is in the driver's seat but we don't even know it. And we don't always realize the deep hurt and pain that our behaviour causes. We're imperfect. That's a reality. That's sin. Missing the mark.

Next up: **Rebellion**. Sometimes we're not aware of our sin, but rebellion, now that's a word that sounds like it's on purpose. The Hebrew word here is *Pesha*, sometimes translated as transgression. This word gets at the idea of breaking trust in a relationship. Betrayal. Treachery. Blatant disobedience. When you rebel, you stand in opposition against someone who you should have been standing with. Or you turn your back on them and go your own way.

Last but not least: **Iniquity**. Common in the Bible, but not so common in our everyday conversations. The Hebrew word used here is *Avon*, sometimes translated as wickedness or guilt. Some scholars say it conveys a sense of being crooked or bent out of shape. Morally distorted. And it can apply not only to our actions, but also the consequences of our behaviour. Iniquity can be a state of living with the painful consequences of our twisted behaviour; we sit in our iniquity, and it bends us out of shape.

This word, *Avon*, iniquity is deeply tied to the idea of forgiveness in the Bible: God's forgiveness is often described as when God bears or carries our iniquity. And that is kind of how this word is used in Exodus 34. So let's look at the word **Forgive**. The Hebrew word here is *Nasa(h)*, and it means to lift, carry, or take. Often we think of forgiveness as letting go. No longer holding an offense against someone. And that is probably a good description of what forgiveness looks like in our human relationships, but understanding forgiveness this way in relation to God isn't quite right. It paints

Him as someone who has to overcome his own anger and vengefulness to let us off the hook for our mistakes and failures, but kind of leaves us to pick up the pieces of our broken behaviour.

But think about the way that God is describing His forgiveness here. The Lord carries our iniquity. He bears the consequences of our rebellion. He grabs hold of our sin and He lifts it off of us. That's a very different picture of forgiveness than the idea of an angry God letting us off the hook. There's something powerfully transformational about God's forgiveness. He lifts our sins off of us, and in the process, begins to set right what is crooked and broken within us.

Psalm 103 quotes Exodus 34 and paints a picture of the kind of forgiveness God is speaking of. Starting at verse 7 it says:

***Psalm 103:7-12***

*He revealed his character to Moses  
and his deeds to the people of Israel.  
The LORD is compassionate and merciful,  
slow to get angry and filled with  
unfailing love.  
He will not constantly accuse us,  
nor remain angry forever.  
He does not punish us for all our sins;  
he does not deal harshly with us, as we  
deserve.  
For his unfailing love toward those who  
fear him  
is as great as the height of the heavens  
above the earth.  
He has removed our sins as far from us  
as the east is from the west.*

What an incredible description of the forgiveness of God. He has removed our sins, our rebellion, our iniquity, as far from us as the east is from the west. So let's just gather up all three of those words for a moment. Sin. Rebellion. Iniquity. As we think about all that these words encompass, all the broken ways that we behave towards each other and towards God, we start to get a sense of the scope of God's forgiveness. All together, these three words describe all the broken behaviour of humanity.

When God described who He is to Moses, God didn't just choose one of these words, he used all of them. Because his forgiveness covers all of them. So

if you've ever wondered what sins God is able to forgive, the answer is all of them. **There's no mistake, fault, or failure too great or too far out of reach of God's forgiveness.**

Maybe that's a truth that you've understood for a long time, and if so, I hope you can just anchor into it once again today. But if there's something that you've been carrying—maybe a sense that you've missed the mark or you're not measuring up in some way ... or maybe you've been carrying the weight of some sin, some mistake, some failure, that you have believed is beyond the scope of God's forgiveness, hear this today—God is eager to lift it from you. To remove it, as far as the east is from the west. It's part of His character. It's who He is.

And when God says that He is a God who forgives, these aren't empty words. And this is where we need to understand the lead up to the verses we are looking at today. The context will help us understand God's words more deeply. We can TRUST God's claim here that he is forgiving. We can be confident that God forgives even our most epic of failures because **when He spoke these words in Exodus 34 about forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin, the Israelites' iniquity, rebellion, and sin had just been on display for all to see. They had just had a failure of epic proportions.**

If you know the story of Israel, you know that God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and at this point in the story, they were in the desert, at the foot of Mount Sinai, just about to begin their journey to the promised land. Moses had gone up to the mountain top, where God gave him the 10 commandments, and explained his very detailed plan for the Israelites to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. By following the law set out for them, they would be shaped into a people who could represent God to the world. A people who God could use to reveal His character to the nations, and through this, all people could be blessed. And so Moses came down from the mountaintop, shared everything that the Lord had said, the law that would be established—and there would be a LOT of rules to follow—then scripture tells us that:

### ***Exodus 24:3b***

*All the people answered with one voice, "We will do everything the LORD has commanded."*

They were all in.

Next, Moses went back up the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, to finalize the details of the new covenant, and then he was going to bring the tablets of the law down to the people—a written confirmation of the covenant that had been made. But here, things took a turn for the worst. God told Moses:

### ***Exodus 3 :7-8***

*"Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."*

The Israelites had rebelled against the very first two laws of the covenant:

### ***Exodus 20:3-4***

*"You must not have any other god but me."*  
and  
*"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind..."*

And, to make matters worse, they were giving these false gods credit for what the Lord had done for them, rescuing them from slavery out of Egypt. Their perspective was all twisted around. Their thinking was corrupted. This new covenant relationship had barely gotten started and the people had already broken it.

There are more details than I have time to share about how the aftermath of this moment of rebellion played out, but what is important to know for today is that although Moses was furious with the people, even throwing the stone tablets that God had written the 10 commandments on to the ground and breaking them, just like the people had broken the covenant, and although there *were* serious

consequences for the sinful behaviour of the people, Moses also pleaded with God on their behalf, and God agreed not to bring disaster on the nation of Israel, and to continue in His relationship with them.

Now, we are almost to chapter 34, but first, there is this fascinating exchange between God and Moses. God had told Moses that it was time for the people to leave Mount Sinai and begin their journey to the promised land. Things were ready to move forward. But Moses seemed to have some reservations, and you get the sense that he wasn't feeling 100% secure about the relationship between God and the Israelites. He was feeling some uncertainty about how things would unfold from here. And it makes sense if you think about it.

Imagine for a moment, that you have a friend who is engaged to be married. Wedding planning is difficult these days for sure, but maybe you even know someone who is engaged right now, or can remember back to when someone close to you was engaged. So picture that engaged friend in your mind. Now imagine that before the wedding day, they find out that their future spouse cheated on them. They broke trust, failing to live up to the faithfulness that was expected in the relationship. What advice would you have for your friend?

Would you say it was no big deal? That everyone makes mistakes? That it will all be fine and they should just go ahead with the wedding? Maybe not. Unless, of course, you don't like your friend very much and want them to experience a lot of pain and heartache. This betrayal is what most people would call a *red flag* and likely you would want your friend to carefully reconsider before deciding whether to move forward with the wedding. To think about what this betrayal has done to the trust in the relationship, what it has revealed about the character of their future spouse, and whether it is something that they could truly get past as a couple.

Here in Exodus, God was in a similar position, and Moses was so aware of this. The Israelites had proven themselves to be unfaithful. They had broken trust. Would God risk further betrayal? And how was it going to play out when the Israelites inevitably missed the mark again. Because they would. And so, when God said it was time to move forward, that they should pack up, and start the journey to the promised land, Moses hesitated. And

in this moment of hesitation, as Moses looked to God for reassurance, he made a strange request. He said:

***Exodus 33:18***

*Show me your glory, I pray.*

You might be wondering why I call this strange. But let's think about the experiences Moses had had with God up to this point: Moses had encountered many incredible and miraculous displays of God's power and glory—the burning bush, the plagues in Egypt, the pillars of cloud and fire that led the people out of Egypt, and the parting of the red sea. And in their conversations on top of Mount Sinai, God had come to Moses in a thick cloud, and they had talked with one another. Exodus 33 also describes how the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. What more of God's glory was there for Moses to experience? And yet, Moses still made this request:

*Show me your glory, I pray.*

And **that** is the question that God was responding to when he revealed his character to Moses on Mount Sinai. Now, we could probably do an entire sermon series exploring the idea of God's Glory, and although we don't have time to delve into that today, what's important to recognize here is that with this question, Moses was seeking to know and experience God on a whole new level—more deeply, more intimately, than ever before.

As Paul mentioned last week, there are a lot of things that God could have chosen to say about Himself here. About all that he had created. About all that he did. About how powerful and mighty and majestic he was. But instead, everything that God said about Himself here was about how He relates to humanity. What it is like to be in a relationship with Him. And I think this was exactly what Moses was looking for when he asked to see God's Glory.

God was about to renew the covenant with His people, even rewriting the 10 commandments on a new set of tablets—restoring what had been shattered at the bottom of the mountain when the people rebelled. And so, before this pivotal moment in the relationship between God and Israel, Moses wanted to know, to really know, who God was, and

how He would respond to the broken behaviour of his people. And so, God made his character known:

*Compassionate. Merciful. Slow to Anger.  
Abounding in Love and Faithfulness.*

And when the Lord declared: *I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. Forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin*, He was explaining to Moses exactly how this relationship was going to work. The very first word of verse 7 actually means to watch, to guard, or to keep (*Natsar*). The NLT translation: *I lavish unfailing love...* is beautifully poetic, but doesn't fully capture what God is saying here. So let's take a look at a few other translations:

- *maintaining love to thousands*, (NIV)
- *keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation* (NRSV).

God was saying here that He would do the hard work of maintaining the covenant relationship with his people. **It would not rely on the imperfect character of the Israelites; it would rely on the perfect character of God.** God wouldn't just pour out his love, He would protect it. He would guard it. He would maintain it. And the way that he would do this was through His forgiveness.

Have you ever tried to have a good relationship with someone who is unforgiving? Someone who holds a grudge, keeps a long list of the ways that you've wronged them, and holds your mistakes against you, even when you've recognized the ways that you've fallen short and tried to make amends? It doesn't work so well. Often those are painful relationships, and it's very difficult, almost impossible to have a close, connected relationship with them.

On the other hand, relationships where people are quick to forgive and don't keep a record of wrongs are much easier to maintain. What would it be like in our marriages, in our friendships, in our extended families, if we had confidence that our mistakes and failings would be met with forgiveness? People who don't quickly take offense and who have a great capacity for forgiveness are easy to stay close to. And when we are quick to forgive the people that we love, we make it easy for them to stay close to us. It protects our connection. It keeps our faults and failures from coming between us and driving

disconnection. And that is what God does for us, so that we can stay close to Him.

I know forgiveness can be a complicated process that takes genuine hard work, and maintaining close, healthy relationships with our loved ones requires work on both sides: not just a willingness to forgive, but also a willingness to acknowledge the wrongs that have happened and work towards changing that broken behaviour. And sometimes we forgive but it is not safe to keep close to someone who is going to continue to cause us deep pain. So there's a lot more that could be said here about the dynamics of forgiveness. This is such a huge topic; we can't cover it all today. But what's important for now is to know that although it can be difficult to maintain our relationships with one another, **the forgiving nature of God makes it easy to be in relationship with Him. The Lord isn't eager to count our sins against us, and His character is such that He will do everything that he can to make it easy for us to stay close to Him.**

**And the most profound expression of this part of God's character can be seen through Jesus.** In Jesus we see the embodiment of God's character, and when we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and death, we can witness the ways that he revealed God's character to those he met, extending the grace, and mercy, and forgiveness of God to the world. There's a well known story about how Jesus dealt with sin. Here, a group of Pharisees and teachers of religious law...

***John 8:1-11***

*... brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery....*

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him pointing out that according to the law, she should be stoned for her sinful behaviour.

Jesus didn't respond right away, but they demanded an answer and so Jesus said:

*"All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!"*

*When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the*

woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?”

“No, Lord,” she said.

And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

This is a such a powerful story that demonstrates the incredible grace and forgiveness of God. It shows that He is not eager to condemn us, but He is eager to forgive us. It’s who He is.

*Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone.*

The only one standing there that day who was without sin, the only one who could have thrown a stone at this woman, was Jesus. He lived a perfect, sinless life. There’s not another human on the planet who could have thrown a stone at her in that moment. But instead of condemning her, he offered these words to her: “Go, and sin no more.”

It’s actually really powerful that Jesus says these words to her. In a sense, they are aspirational words. This woman is not literally going to live out the rest of her life without ever sinning again. But there is such hope in Jesus’ words here—that she is not condemned, nor is she sentenced to continue to repeat the painful and devastating patterns of sinful behaviour. Jesus isn’t letting her off the hook, He is lifting her sin off of her. She walked away from that moment forever changed.

And when we experience God’s forgiveness, it changes us too. He doesn’t just excuse our sin while leaving us stuck in it. As we invite Christ more and more into our lives, his redemptive power is at work in us. God’s forgiveness opens the door to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, renewing and transforming our minds and hearts, and piecing back together what is broken in us.

None of us will move forward in life without ever missing the mark. But whether we are looking at the smallest imperfection or the most devastating failure, Jesus reminds us here that He is the only one who is perfect. No one is expecting that we will all be perfect too. The rest of us have all had our *fail* moments, and some of them have been pretty epic. And we know we will miss the mark again. But

thankfully, **our closeness to God doesn’t rely on an absence of mistakes; it relies on the truth of God’s perfect character.** The Lord will maintain his love to us, as imperfect as we are, because He is perfect, and there is no sin or mistake beyond the reach of His forgiveness.

*The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and merciful. Slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness. Maintaining love to thousands and forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin.*  
Amen.

**Points to Ponder**  
**Sunday, April 25, 2021**  
*Who is God? In His Own Words*  
**The God of Forgiveness: Exodus 34:6-7**

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. There have been a lot of losses over this past year. Humour can be an important way that we deal with grief and loss, and laughter can help us through all kinds of challenging seasons of life. What makes you laugh these days?
2. Sometimes we like to laugh at our mistakes, and even the mistakes of others. Can you think of a funny *fail* moment that you've experienced? Maybe it wasn't funny in the moment but you find you can laugh about it now?
3. The reality of our imperfection is addressed throughout the pages of scripture, but the idea that sin is a very real problem that exists is not always popular in our society. What evidence do you see that suggests that the problem of sin truly does exist in the world today?
4. Scripture uses several different words to describe humans' imperfect behavior, including iniquity (transgression, guilt or wickedness), rebellion (betrayal or breaking trust), and sin (missing the mark). In Exodus 34:7 God declares that he forgives it all. In what ways does the expansive scope of God's forgiveness encourage you? "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12)
5. Are there faults or mistakes in your life, or in the lives of others, that you find difficult to believe God can (or should) forgive? How does this create distance or barriers in your relationships with others, and in your relationship with God?

6. It is difficult to be in a relationship with someone who is unforgiving, holds grudges, and keeps a record of wrongs. Have you experienced this with someone in your life? In what ways does God's forgiving nature make it easy for us to be in relationship with Him?
7. Jesus is the full embodiment of God's character. In what ways do you see Jesus expressing the forgiving nature of God throughout the Gospels? (See John 8:2-11, Luke 5:17-26).
8. What steps can you take this week to further reflect on God's forgiveness, and to allow the truth of God's forgiveness to more deeply take root and transform your life?

**Action Item and Prayer:**

Jesus taught that just as we have been forgiven by God through Christ, so we must forgive others. Take time to pray this week:

- *Lord, where am I missing the mark in my relationship with others, and in my relationship with you? Help me to recognize where I am going wrong and turn back to you. Help me to accept your forgiveness for the ways I have fallen short, and help me to allow you to work in my life, lifting my faults and failures from me and helping me to do a better job of loving you and loving others.*
- *Lord, are there ways that I am not living out your call to extend forgiveness to others, just as you have forgiven me? Help me to see where I am holding onto offense and I need to forgive. Help me to let go of any anger, bitterness, or resentment, and to extend grace and forgiveness to those who have wronged me.*