

Exodus 34:5-9

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The LORD appears to Moses in preparation for the renewal of the covenant. He appeared in the cloud, passed before Moses, and proclaimed His character. Moses in turn bowed down in worship before the LORD. He then petitioned the LORD once again to remain among His people in spite of their unfaithfulness.

In preparation for renewing the covenant with Israel, *the Lord descended in the cloud*. The *cloud*, as when the covenant was first ratified ([Exodus 19](#)) was the visible manifestation of the LORD. And here, the LORD *stood there with Moses as he called upon the name of the Lord*.

During this new vision, *the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed Who He is:*

The Lord, the Lord God. The Hebrew literally reads “LORD, LORD God.” *LORD* (Heb. “Yahweh”) is the covenant name for God. Repeating the name is an intense expression which is intended to emphasize His existence, His eternity, and His covenant relationship with His people.

Compassionate and gracious. The Hebrew word for *compassionate* is “rakham,” and it refers to a deep love of one to another. For example, it is used in [Isaiah 49:15](#) of a mother’s love for “the son of her womb.” The LORD is *compassionate* and also *gracious*, bestowing unmerited forgiveness and favor upon those who do not deserve it. God had just demonstrated this in relenting from judging Israel for breaking the covenant they had just consented to follow. These two words, *compassionate and gracious*, are used together in several other places in Scripture to describe the LORD, such as [2 Kings 13:23](#), [2 Chron. 30:9](#), [Nehemiah 9:17](#), and [Joel 2:13](#).

Slow to anger. The Hebrew literally reads “long of nose” or “long of nostrils.” A short nose refers to being hot-tempered (or a “short fuse”). Being “long of nose” describes one who is the opposite of “hot-tempered,” that is, long-suffering and patient. Thankfully for us, God is patient, and *slow to anger*.

Abounding in lovingkindness and truth. This phrase further explains the LORD’s being *slow to anger*. The Hebrew word for *lovingkindness* (“hesed”)

has been translated several different ways, such as “loyal-love,” “goodness,” and “kindness,” referring to the LORD’s loving loyalty to the covenant with His people.

The Lord also abounds in *truth*. Although God is loving, *truth* is not compromised. The people may break the covenant, with repercussions as per the covenant, but God will always keep His word. Even though sometimes the LORD is merciful and sometimes withholds the full judgement the people deserve, justice is always served, and *truth* is upheld. Even though God is merciful, He *will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*

Who keeps lovingkindness for thousands. His *lovingkindness* (again “hesed”) was kept *for thousands* (or “to the thousandth generation”), an expression stating that the LORD’s “hesed” is inexhaustible. God’s *lovingkindness* is not limited and cannot be used up. When someone is faithful, God’s blessing on them continues uninterrupted.

Who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. Another expression of the LORD’s mercy was that He *forgives* (also “lift up”, “carry away”) *sin*. Three words for *sin* are used here. *Iniquity* (Heb. “avon”) refers to that which is twisted or distorted. *Transgression* (Heb. “peshah”) has a root idea of a violation of agreement or authority between persons, whether interpersonal or spiritual. The word is translated “rebellion” in [1 Samuel 24:11](#), where David assures King Saul that he is not a rebel against his reign, proving Saul was in his hand to slay him, and David spared his life. The word *sin* (Heb. “hatah”) is the primary word for *sin* in the Old Testament and has the idea of missing the mark, the standard for behavior, or losing one’s way from the proper path.

Along with declaring His infinite graciousness, the LORD stated that He is completely just. His justice can be seen in the fact that *He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*. The words *the guilty* are not in the Hebrew text. The phrase is intensive, meaning that there was no chance of acquittal for those who do not want to live according to the commands of God. In fact, the consequences of rebelling against God’s benevolent reign, where each command is designed to benefit each person as well as their community, will result in the *visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations*.

This phrase emphasizing the *third and fourth generations* likely emphasizes both the justice as well as the patience of God, that He is *slow to anger*. If the *iniquity* persists, the consequences will eventually reach full manifestation in the *third and fourth* generation. The consequence for sin is death,

separation. That's the reality of cause-and-effect in the world as it currently is. But God's patience allows for several generations the chance to repent, prior to the full *iniquity* being judged. God is just, however, and *will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*. Of course God will in due time come to earth as a human, in the person of Jesus, and take on the sins of the world, and make this statement completely true while simultaneously offering His mercy to the entire world ([John 3:14-16](#)). In light of the LORD's revelation of Himself, *Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship* (v. 8). Being in the presence of such a LORD as described in the previous verses can and should result only in worship. Moses had experienced firsthand much of the reality of what God revealed. God is not bragging, He is simply stating what is true. He is speaking to Moses, who is the most humble man in all the earth ([Numbers 12:3](#)). Humility is seeing things as they truly are; viewing the world with reality. Moses recognizes the truth of what God states, and responds appropriately, by bowing *low* and worshipping God, by acknowledging the truth of His statements.

Moses then petitioned the LORD, based on the previous statement God made that Moses had found favor in His sight ([Exodus 33:17](#)). Moses now petitions God, that if He had truly *found favor* in the sight of the LORD, then Moses asked God to *go along in our midst*. God stated in [Exodus 33:3](#) that He would not go along in the *midst* of the people, lest He judge their iniquity. Later, Moses got God to agree to join Israel's march with His presence ([Exodus 33:14](#)). Now Moses seeks God's full reversal, and asks Him to *go along in our midst*, in spite of that fact that *the people are so obstinate*.

The humble Moses does not dispute the reality that the people are *obstinate*. He had experienced this himself. Moses had previously asked God to heap any adverse consequences upon him that were due to the people, a proposal which God rejected ([Exodus 32:31-33](#)). Now Moses asks God to lighten His discipline upon the people by distancing His presence from their *midst*, and his new line of argument is to ask God to do this as an extension of God's expressed favor toward Moses, because of Moses' faithfulness. Moses' argument might be expressed along the lines of: "If You want to show me how much you favor me, please come with us among our *midst*, even though the people are *obstinate*."

Moses continues to intercede for the people in spite of the fact the people had consistently resisted his leadership ([Exodus 14:11](#), [15:24](#); [16:3](#), [16:19](#); [17:2-3](#)). Of course this wasn't a one-way street—Moses likely benefits from this as well, as God being in their *midst* makes it more likely that the people will follow Moses as he seeks to lead them to obey God, and keep their covenant with

Him. This might be an illustration of the biblical principle that we serve our own self-interest best when we serve others in obedience to God.

Moses also asked the LORD to *pardon* the people's *iniquity* (Heb. "avon") and the people's *sin* (Heb. "hatah"), and finally *take us as Your own possession*. In short, Moses wanted the LORD to forgive the sinful actions of His rebellious people and fully restore the fellowship with them that He had before the horrible sin in [Exodus 32](#). In light of Moses' successful intercession to gain forgiveness and restoration for the people based on God's favor toward Moses, it is worthwhile considering this passage from the New Testament book of James. James was Jewish, the half-brother of Jesus, and the head elder in the church of Jerusalem. In addition to the passage on Elijah, he might have learned of intercession for others from this episode of Moses' intercession for the people:

"Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

([James 5:14-20](#))

Moses also prayed that the LORD would *take us as Your own possession*. This is an additional request for forgiveness, as God has previously stated He would make Israel His *own possession* as a reward for the people obeying His commands and keeping His covenant:

"Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My

own *possession* among all the peoples...”
([Exodus 19:3-6](#)).

Just after God stated this proposal to obey His voice, Moses “set before [the elders] all these words which the LORD had commanded him.” ([Exodus 19:7](#)). The people shortly afterwards agreed to the “deal,” the covenant, and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” ([Exodus 19:8](#)). In a matter of days they completely violated the covenant with the incident of the golden calf, which would clearly violate the condition God set for making Israel His *own possession*. Now Moses asks God to make Israel His *own possession* based on God’s favor toward Moses.

God will not here respond directly to Moses’ request to make Israel His *own possession* in this passage. When Moses gives his farewell address and prepares Israel to enter the land as recorded in Deuteronomy, he states:

“But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today”
([Deuteronomy 4:20](#))

Moses repeats this in [Deuteronomy 7:6](#) and [14:2](#). This would indicate God reinstated the conditional opportunity, that the people would be God’s *own possession* as a special reward for obeying His covenant. This particular reward—a special position as His *possession*, like a precious jewel among the nations in God’s economy—was conditional upon Israel’s obedience. However, God’s choice of Israel as His chosen people was an irrevocable grant, based on His own promises to the patriarchs ([Romans 11:1-3,26-29](#)).

God will soon instruct that the tabernacle be built. It will be located in their *midst*, which presumably fulfills God’s agreement to go forward to the Promised Land in their *midst*, as Moses requested.

Biblical Text:

⁵The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. ⁶Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” ⁸Moses made haste to bow low toward the

earth and worship. ⁹He said, “If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession.”