

Exodus 34:1-10  
“A Fresh Start”

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*A Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading: Exodus 34:1-10*

Introductory Piece:

Children, please gather around for the Bible story. This is our last story from the book of Exodus for this fall. Today the story tells us about how God gave Moses two new tablets with the Ten Commandments etched on them and a fresh start, so they could go forward toward the Promised Land.

The Story:

God told Moses: “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones that you broke, and I will write on them the words that were originally on them. Be ready in the morning to climb up the mountain and meet with me. Come alone. Don’t even let any animals graze at the base of the mountain tomorrow.”

Moses did as God directed. Then Moses sensed the Presence of God in the cloud. That was when God promised: “I am the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, staying loving and true to a thousand generations of people into the future. I forgive shortcomings and sin, but the consequences of sinning are real; they can carry on to the third and fourth generation.”

Moses was moved to bow his head and kneel down on the ground to worship God. Moses said, “If I have found favor in your sight, go with us. Even though we are a stubborn and foolish people, pardon our wrongdoing, and take us as yours!”

God replied: “I hereby make an agreement with you. I will perform mighty acts before you and the people, deeds that surrounding neighbors will also see. I will do an awesome thing with you all!”

Does anyone here need a fresh start today? *Raise your hand.* A new beginning? A ‘do-over?’ And who among the raised hands fears that a fresh start may be impossible to come by? *Raise your hand.*

Maybe there’s been a rift in your family, or you’re a veteran still dealing with the horrors of war, or as an environmental steward, you’re concerned about whether environmental rollbacks can actually be reinstalled to new eco-positive policies. **A fresh start may seem impossible to us because we have experienced the real consequences of our sin and the distancing we have done from God, and we know that these can indeed last into the future.**

When the Israelites considered their foolish choice to worship the golden calf and break the commandments, the ‘stinger’ seemed to stay in them and poison the lives of their children and grandchildren. Like them, when we are afraid and guilty, our ears hear verse 7d most prominently: “visiting the iniquities...to the third and fourth generations.” “See?” people say: “Impossible!”

John Steinbeck wrote his classic, *East of Eden*, in 1952, about the Trask family in Salinas County, California.<sup>1</sup> They had already suffered the generational upheavals of sin before Adam Trask and his pregnant wife, Cathy, moved to the state and purchased a farm. She gave birth to twins, Caleb and Aron, and then immediately escaped the family to follow her own story of iniquity and violence.

The boys were very different from each other: Caleb, insecure and rebellious; Aron, dutiful, likeable, and naïve. Both were jealous of each other and of gaining their father Adam's favor.

Their Chinese cook, Lee, helps to raise them and carries the thread of the theological theme of the book. He comments upon the Cain and Abel story from Genesis 4:6-7, eventually pointing out that neither of these characters are doomed to sin, but that they may *choose* to change the curses with which they live.

Lee did this by instructing them on the Hebrew term “timshel” in the Genesis passage. You see, it is not inevitable that Cain must roam east of Eden in guilt and shame, even after killing Abel. God tells Cain, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; it desires to consume you.” But the verb timshel means “thou *mayest*” – “you *may* master it.” In other words, **a possibility of a fresh start.**

Exodus echoes the same possibility. 1. God re-writes the ten “words” on the two new tablets. 2. More importantly, God initiates a new covenant with Moses and the people that enables them to start over together. 3. God also has plans for them as they move from the wilderness wandering to a more purposeful journey to the land of promise.

**A fresh start. God gives the real hope of a fresh start, and for much further into the future than the consequences of sin travel.** Did you hear this promise in verse 7a? “God’s steadfast love is to a thousand generations!” Not just *one* generation into the future, not 20, or 50, or 100! God’s steadfast love goes beyond 500, 800, to 1000! Basically, lasting forever.

So today you can start to heal. Your personality defects – being “stiff-necked,” for instance – need not plague you forever. As the little girl discovered: “Mommy, yesterday, I let my thoughts push *me* around. Today, I’m going to push *them* around!”

It *is* possible to begin again from any infidelity in your marriage. Alcoholism may be managed before the next generation feels its effects. There’s also forgiveness for gang-related violence that in turn can positively impact *ten* generations into the future, and it is possible for the “earth can breathe again,” as the hymn puts it, restoring itself to the thousandth generation.

A fresh start: take hold of it!

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<sup>1</sup>John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), Chapters 22 & 24.