

Hard Grace, Or, A Tale Of Three Mountains

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[0 : 00] In the life of Moses, there's an exchange between God and Moses in which God comes down really hard on Moses. It follows the second time that God supplied water from a rock for Israel during their wilderness wanderings.

And if you're familiar with it, I suspect God's side of the exchange has struck you as harsh, even cruel. Moses had done something wrong and God meted out punishment, but the punishment was severe.

God told Moses that because of what he had done, he would not be allowed to enter the promised land. So, after 40 years of having led Israel around in circles in the desert, Moses was not going to be allowed to cross over Jordan with Israel to the land promised to their forefathers.

Despite Moses' pleas for mercy, for grace, God does not relent. In discussing this incident with a friend of mine, he asked, where is the grace in that?

Indeed, where is the grace in that? Is there no forgiveness for this man who served God faithfully, heroically, for 40 years? I think we'll find that there is grace.

[1 : 20] It's what we might call hard grace. But there is grace. And with God's help, my intent is to have us reflect upon how that is by recounting Moses' life with the help of three mountains.

One on which he was called. Then one on which he was chastened. And finally, a third on which he was content. And why mountains?

Well, because as one commentator has observed in the Bible, the mountain is the place where God and humanity encounter one another. Indeed, where God reveals himself to humanity.

So, we can expect that God's dealings with Moses on mountains has also something to say to us.

So, let's pray. Lord God, we do put this time before you as we consider your word together, and we consider particularly here the life of our brother in the faith, Moses.

We ask God that you would give us ears to hear, hearts ready to receive your word, that it might bear fruit to your glory. In Christ's name, amen. So, the first mountain is Horeb, or also known as Mount Sinai.

[2 : 30] It's where God meets with Moses and issues his call for Moses to deliver Israel. We just read that. Moses is tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, in Midian.

And that wandering brings him onto the side of the mountain of Horeb. And there, what does he see? He sees a bush that is aflame. But as he looks closer, the bush is not consumed.

And he says, this is a strange thing. I should go have a look at it. And as he approaches, suddenly there's a voice that comes out of that burning bush. Moses! Moses! And he says, here I am.

And the voice says, take off your sandals, for the ground on which you are standing is holy ground. And so it turns out that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, as we can call him, has come to see Moses.

Because he has a task for Moses. He says, I've seen the affliction of my people, the taskmasters in Egypt, and how they're treating my people. I've heard their cries. And I've come down to deliver them.

[3 : 33] And I'm going to send you for that task. And Moses says, well, why me? Why would I be sent down? He said, I will be with you. I will be with you.

And I will give you a sign. That sign is that after you have delivered them out of Egypt, you will bring them back to serve me on this mountain. And that will indeed be a sign.

Because it will indicate that he has been told that they have been indeed liberated from Egypt, liberated from Pharaoh. They will have crossed the Red Sea by then. They've gone by on dry land. And Pharaoh's army will have been swallowed up by that same water.

And it was on that same mountain that Moses will commune with God to receive the law. Indeed, Horeb is Mount Sinai. And it will be a sign that God was with Moses.

Now, this encounter happens when Moses is 80 years old. And 40 years prior to this, he had been living in Egypt, of all places, as a member of Pharaoh's court, of all things.

[4 : 34] He was rescued as a young baby. You know the story. By a daughter of Pharaoh. Pharaoh had made this edict that the male children of the Hebrews were to be put to death.

And it was in that environment that Moses was born. He was raised by his mother, kept secret until he was weaned. And then, in an effort to keep him alive, they create a little basket.

They put him in it. And they put him in the river. And they set him afloat. And his older sister, Miriam, keeps watch to see what's going to happen to my little brother. And what happens? But one of the daughters of Pharaoh sees this child, recognizes that it's a Hebrew child, and that he is beautiful, and takes the child and brings him into her own house.

Here is Moses, this Hebrew boy, is now in Pharaoh's court. And he is there for a long time. We're told, one day, still in the court, at the age of 40, he purposely decides to go out among the Hebrews. He understands them to be his people. And he knows that they were being used as slaves. And as he goes out, he sees one of them being mistreated by one of the Egyptian masters. And so he steps in, he intercedes, he ends up striking the Egyptian and killing him.

[5 : 45] Well, the next day, he goes out, and he sees two Hebrew slaves there arguing with one another, and one striking one, and he steps in. And he says, why are you doing that? And the one turns to him and says, who are you? Are you Lord over us?

Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian? So Moses knew that the word was out. Indeed, Pharaoh hears about this, and he seeks to have Moses put to death.

But Moses flees. He flees to the land of Midian, and there he meets and marries Zipporah. And her father is Jethro, the one who owns the sheep that he is tending when the burning bush incident happens.

So God used that device of the burning bush to get Moses' attention. And he speaks to him, a voice coming out of that burning bush. Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, identified himself and issued that call to Moses.

He was to go to Egypt to deliver the Hebrews and their bondage. And he was to lead them out of Egypt and to the promised land, the land promised to their forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[6 : 52] So from this mountain, Horeb, on which he receives this call from God, he descends. He goes to Egypt. He stands before Pharaoh. He demands that he lets the people of God go.

He leads them out. And for 40 years, he shepherds them. He rebukes the Israelites. He protects them. He taught them. He fights for them. He intercedes for them. And he drew them back again and again from the brink of destruction.

He continued to lead them for 40 years, despite the fact that it would have only been a matter of weeks had they listened to the spies who came back after scouting out the promised land.

Twelve had gone in. They all come back. Two give a good report. Ten give a negative report. And the crowd listens to the negative report. And God says, they will not enter.

This generation will not enter. And so here is Moses leading a group of people around for 40 years when it only would have taken a few weeks for him to get into the promised land. And during those 40 years, he pours his life into this calling.

[7 : 55] And now it's all to be taken away from him. So we fast forward another 40 years. And now we find Moses on another mountain.

This one, the one called Mount Nebo. And it was a mountain east of the Jordan, outside of the promised land. God told him to go to the top of it, to ascend to it. And there he would meet with him.

And so he goes. And God brings him up to Mount Nebo. It's in this mountain range, Pisgah. And he's there to give an opportunity. He says, look out. Look out upon the land.

And so he looks way to the north. He looks to the west. He looks to the east. He looks to the south. And he says, all of this land I'm going to give my people. But you will not enter.

You will not enter. This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your eyes. But you shall not go over there.

[8 : 55] Now to understand that statement on the part of God, we have to go back. Not that long in the history. But go back to an incident that I alluded to at the beginning. And that we sung about.

The incident at Meribah.

It was another time when Israel began to complain about the fact that they're in this wilderness place. And there's no water to drink. And so they assembled themselves together, we're told, in Numbers chapter 20.

Against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, Would that we have perished when our brothers perished before the Lord. Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness? That we should die here, both we and our cattle.

And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates. And there's no water to drink.

And Moses and Aaron, they go from the presence of the people. And they go into the tent of meeting. They fall on their faces. The glory of the Lord appears to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Take the staff.

[9 : 54] Moses' staff. The same staff with which he struck a rock once before. With which he hit the Red Sea. That parted the waters. Take the staff and assemble the congregation. You and Aaron, your brother.

Tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them. And give drink to the congregation and their cattle. So Moses took the staff from before the Lord as he commanded him.

And what does he do? Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, it says.

And he said to them, Hear now, you rebels. Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?

And Moses lifted up his hand. And he strikes the rock with his staff twice. And water came out abundantly. And the congregation drank and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Because you did not believe in me to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given to them.

What's the problem here? Well, God gives his reason. Because you did not believe in me to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel.

[11 : 11] See, God had instructed Moses to assemble Israel before this rock. This was, therefore, a holy assembly, a divine assembly, one constituted by God.

It was to be a time when God would show himself as the God who had chosen Israel above all the families of the earth. He was their God and they were his people. And despite all of their failings, he remained steadfast in his love towards them.

This moment was to be about God. But Moses' anger got the best of him and he made the moment about himself. Hear now, you rebels.

Shall we bring water out of this rock for you? Moses lifts up his hand. He strikes the rock twice.

Well, does James speak when he says, Know this, my beloved brothers, Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

God describes Moses' act as one of unbelief. He says, Because you did not believe in me. How often, right, the Bible links belief and faith, belief and works.

[12 : 28] What we do offers a clear evidence about what we believe. And as I alluded to before, on a previous occasion, God had instructed Moses to strike a rock to produce water.

But this time he said, Speak to the rock. Now, we could speculate on why that change in procedure. But given the story itself, what's important is Moses ignoring or being deaf to God's command.

Had the previous experience, perhaps, caused Moses to think that God forgot how he brings water out of a rock? Oh, no, God, you don't speak to it. You hit it, right? I'll hit it. Or had his frustration with these people, whom he had led, consoled, pleaded with, rebuked, interceded.

Perhaps it had reached a boiling point, and he decided that it was time for them to tell them how fed up he was with them. I mean, it's hard not to sympathize with Moses in this moment.

And I suspect we very well might have acted as he did at that time. I mean, it has been going on now for 40 years. And it began by they're not listening in the first place, so they've been wandering in the desert for 40 years.

[13 : 42] And here, because they didn't hear with faith on that time when the spies came back, and they were not permitted to go in, now Moses, prompted by his anger, because of his unbelief, is not going to be able to go in.

Now, Moses, though, he's not stoic in this matter. I mean, he's not going, oh, okay, well, let your will be done. No, we read in Deuteronomy chapter 3, he's related to how he pleaded with God to let him enter the promised land.

He says, and I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, oh, Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand for what God is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works as your mighty acts and mighty acts as yours.

Please, let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country in Lebanon. That word translated, pleaded for us, actually is a request for favor, for grace.

He says, you've only begun to show your servant your greatness. I mean, that's an extraordinary statement, right? I mean, if you know the story, given all that he had experienced from Egypt to the defeat of Og, the entire span of the time in which he has been leading these people, he has seen incredible works, and yet he describes what he has seen as only the beginning.

[15:08] And why was that? Because I think it's because all that preceded had led up to the promised land. This was the covenant promise, the covenant promise of land.

And when God called them out of the burning bush, he said that indeed that was the goal. He would deliver them from bondage, bring them into the promised land. Moses has no idea, no way of knowing what specific mighty deeds he would witness, but that they would be done on the other side of the Jordan was what it was all about.

The greatness of the deeds were not so much attached to them, but to the purpose, the promised land. But the decision of God is final.

His answer is definitive. Moses goes on to say, But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, listen to this. The Lord said to me, enough from you.

Do not speak to me again on this matter. Enough from you, Moses. Do not speak to me again on this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah. Lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan.

[16:22] Does that strike you as harsh? Perhaps even unfair. After all, this was Moses. This was Moses. This is not Pharaoh, Ahab, Jezebel, Haman, or any of the other villains in Scripture.

This is Moses with whom God spoke face to face. It seemed awfully, awfully harsh. Even unfair.

I mean, I think we respond with a sense of this injustice even, because we think Moses had earned the right to enter. He put up with a lot. Yes, sure, he messed up.

But I mean, goodness gracious, come on. Well, that's our response. And let me suggest it exposes two problems. First, it confuses justice and grace.

The late R.C. Sproul said, The minute we think that anybody owes us grace, a bell should go off in our heads to alert us that we are no longer thinking about grace, because grace, by definition, is something we don't deserve.

[17:27] It is something we cannot possibly deserve. We have no merit before God, only demerit. If God should ever, ever treat us justly outside of Christ, we would perish.

Our feet would surely slip. There's a wonderful story attached to that, and I won't relate it right now, but if you're not familiar with it, he tells it quite often. You can Google it. Just Google Sproul grading. And it's a time when he first went in teaching in the university. He had 250 students, freshmen in a class. And he told them, You've got three papers, and they're due on these dates. And if you don't turn it on the right date, you get an F.

First time, some of them don't show up. Second time, some of them don't show up. And third time, everybody thinks grace is grace. Grace is mine. And he says, No, no, no. I told you it would be an F. I gave you some extra time other times, but this time, I'm not going to give it to you.

And everybody is horrified, and one voice comes out of the back. That's unfair. He says, Was that you, Fitzgerald? Yeah. What did you get last time?

[18:29] You turned in your paper late, right? Yeah. He said, Okay, you want justice? F on that paper. Everybody was absolutely horrified. But that's because they had confused justice and grace.

Justice is justice, and grace is grace. And if we think somehow that Moses deserves it, that he has earned it, then we're confusing things.

If we think somehow that God is being unfair in that moment, then we're not mindful of what grace is. Secondly, it confuses the consequences of sin and the forgiveness of sin.

See, God promises to forgive us our sin, and we will discover in a little bit that Moses, indeed, sin was forgiven. But it does not necessarily follow that he will undo the consequences of our sin. If someone robs a bank and fleeing the building, and he runs out into the street, he gets hit by a car, he ends up losing his leg, and while in prison, he comes to faith in Christ, well, indeed, he will be reconciled to God.

[19 : 33] He will have the hope of eternal life, but he might not get out of prison, and certainly his leg's not going to grow back. There's consequences to our sin. And so it was with Moses.

Was Moses' sin forgiven? I think we'll see that indeed it was, but there are consequences that come with sin. You see, Moses did not believe God, proven by his not heeding the command that he had been given, which ended up taking glory away from God and placing it on Moses, when God had intended to display his holiness by providing for his own, on whom he had set his love.

And that's a profoundly, a profoundly sinful thing to have done. And as a consequence, he was not going to be allowed to cross over Jordan. So on this second of our mountains, Mount Nebo, Moses is reminded once again that he will not be going into the promised land, and he is chastened. He's chastened because there's no more appeal being made. And yet, we need to remember what the writer of Hebrews says, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.

Now, my original question after this was, where is the grace? Where is the grace? Well, God gave him, Moses, the opportunity to experience him in a way that all of the yearning, frustration, and desire for that earthly reward could only anticipate.

[21 : 07] See, when the promised land is taken away, what is Moses left with? God. God and God alone.

His orientation is taken away from what he sees spread out before him and turned completely on God. His identity as chosen prophet of God, his mission of bringing Israel into the promised land, his anticipation of the future as he looks forward to the experience of God driving out his enemies in the promised land, all of that is taken away.

And what he is left with is God. His identity, his mission, his future is now completely held captive by God and God alone.

That is a grace. It's a hard grace, but it's grace nonetheless. And far from being unjust, it is just because that is the way it's supposed to be.

To have our whole existence oriented toward God. It's what we were created for. It's what we've been redeemed for. What does the psalmist write? Who have I, whom have I in heaven but you?

[22 : 20] And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and the portion forever. Paul says, I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercy of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

You present your bodies, your entire being, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable God, which is your spiritual worship. He writes, and whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So whether you eat or whether you drink, whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God. And what's the first question of the shorter catechism? What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

See, when God withholds the promised land from Moses, he holds out himself. His satisfaction, his sense of purpose, his reason for living has been brought back to its source.

And there's a sense, is there not, that Moses was looking forward to enjoying God by experiencing what God was going to do when Israel entered the promised land. But with that taken away, he was given the opportunity to enjoy God and glory in him just because he is God.

[23 : 37] And while not being able to enter the promised land might have seemed like a demotion, a loss, in truth, it was a promotion, God himself buries his body and welcomes his soul into his presence.

Remember, as the writer of Hebrews says, it's an act of love of our Heavenly Father to chastise and so it was from Moses. He was chastened as an act of love on the part of God.

He was kept from the promised land but he was received into the promised land, the earthly promised land, for shadows. Were his sins forgiven? Indeed, they were forgiven.

God's chastisement kept him from Canaan but God's grace gave him heaven. And that leads us to our third mountain. It's an unnamed one in the scriptures but most scholars believe it to be Mount

Hermon and it's far north.

It's the high mountain on which Jesus was transfigured. Now, there's much that could be said about what's happening to Jesus on that mountain and why but for our purposes we want to note that at this moment of divine revelation Moses joins Jesus along with Elijah.

[24 : 51] Scholars understand the presence of Moses and Elijah to be a kind of visual demonstration of what Jesus says elsewhere that all the law and the prophets point to him. He is indeed that son of man, that glorious being of Daniel chapter 7.

But there is Jesus being transfigured before these three disciples and itself an echo of Moses glowing face when he descended from Sinai after having communed with God.

Now, Moses may have been kept out of Canaan but not out of God's presence. And I think we can assume that whatever disappointment he felt due to God's judgment he's now content.

Was there grace on Mount Nebo? There was grace. It was hard grace but it was grace nonetheless. C.S. Lewis says the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men.

The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men because the hardness of God which says go out into the highways and byways and compel them to come in.

[26 : 00] It says enough from you do not speak to me again about this matter is a hardness used by God to affect deep lasting fellowship with him. There's an old we call them sawdust preachers Billy Sunday he was associated with the temperance movement and the prohibition era back in the states and he said God asks some things that are hard but never any that are unreasonable.

It was hard for Abraham to take his son up to the mountain and prepare to offer him up as a sacrifice to God but God had a reason. Abraham understands that tonight and Abraham is satisfied.

It was hard for Joseph to be torn away from his own people to be sold into Egypt and to be lied about by that miserable woman torn from his mother and father but God had a reason.

Joseph knows tonight and Joseph is satisfied. It was hard for Moses to lead the Jews from Egypt following the cloud by day the pillar of fire by night and making that crossing of the Red Sea only to have God call him up to Mount Pisgah and show him the promised land and say Moses you can't go in.

It was hard but God had a reason and Moses understands tonight and Moses is satisfied. So I said at the beginning that one commentator says that where God and humanity encounter one another is on a mountain.

Indeed it's where God reveals himself to humanity. So we can learn that some about Moses but we can expect also that God's dealings with Moses on mountains has something to say to us.

[27 : 36] So what can we take away from this manifestation of what I've called hard grace? Well we've already considered a couple of things. One that we should not confuse justice and grace.

Grace is evident in the face of justice. Grace is not receiving the justice. We cannot conflate them. We've also considered that we shouldn't confuse the consequences of sin and the forgiveness of sin.

Sin is forgiven but there still might be consequences to come with it. You might not be able to have the life back that you ought to have had had you not sinned as it were. There is grace in learning those two things but where else do we find grace?

I would say seeing Moses standing next to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration is grace for it is the visible proof of the biblical doctrine that we are not justified saved by our works but by the things we do that is by the things we do for God.

If anyone deserved to have the scales of divine justice tilted in his way it was Moses. He took on a task that he did not want he persevered in it despite its overwhelming nature he identified with the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob with God's people and from time to time he was in Pharaoh's court and from the time that he was in Pharaoh's court to his return to that court as the prophet of God declaring let my people go he put up with dissension and threats from those who had been sent to save he even interceded for them pleading with God to forgive them he asked God not to withhold punishment he faithfully administered God's word to Israel led them into the battle against strong foes in many respects Moses' life foreshadowed the person and work of Jesus but he failed did he not?

[29 : 30] He failed Moses was a sinner in need of forgiveness Jesus was not and a person like Moses is not declared fifth for heaven because of what he did but because of God's divine grace and fifth for heaven he was and that is a great grace that is a grace offered to each of us through the gospel the good news that it is not what we do that merits God's favor but who we know that

grants God's favor to us and lastly and here I want to tread lightly and perhaps I'm a little guilty of what C.S. Lewis says the softness of men that is we want to kind of make it feel a little bit better being brought to a place where all where all that has defined you that has motivated you has given life meaning and purpose and have it taken away is devastating and it can happen can it not it can be in a relationship it can be in a career it can be in your health and it can produce hopelessness but if Moses is any measure it's also a place of grace hard grace to be sure but grace nonetheless

God promises just as he was with Moses to be with us no matter what the circumstance and even in the circumstances even in God's leading and directing brings us into these difficult places hard places it's an intention that he might demonstrate his grace to us I don't know how much time elapsed between the incident at Meribah with God's pronouncement that you will not go in and Moses meeting with God on Mount Nebo but it was long enough for Moses to stand there and gaze out on what he had lost and not protest his faith allowed him to be alone with God as he breathed his last and in heaven he's content let's pray Lord forgive us if we look at this circumstance and maybe it's just me with Moses when you say enough of this don't talk to me about this anymore it just seems so uncharacteristic when you speak to

Moses like that Moses your servant your prophet your courageous one the one whom you knew face to face but God it was just Moses had sinned you had desired to show yourself holy and he made it all about himself oh God forgive us for siding with Moses and not with you but we also ask for help help for those times the times of what I call Lord hard grace when the situation is profoundly difficult and even heartbreaking we can hear the longing in Moses just wanting to go in just wanting to see what you're going to do next for your people and yet not being able to go Lord help us Lord and certainly if it is something that is the result of some sin that we have done that has just kind of knocked us out of whatever might have been remind us that you are still with us you are still for us and your intent is to show us your grace and that grace we will rejoice in around the throne and the new heavens and the new earth free from all of those yearnings free from all of that unfinished work free from all of that the brokenness of the world will be able to say yes with Moses with Joseph with Abraham

I'm satisfied Lord this we pray in Jesus name Amen