

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 34

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 34 stands at the hinge of the golden calf catastrophe. The tablets have been shattered (ch. 32), Moses has interceded at extraordinary length (ch. 33), and now the LORD acts to restore what sin had broken. The chapter moves through four distinct movements: the command to Moses to ascend Sinai again with newly cut tablets (vv. 1–4); the theophanic self-disclosure of the LORD’s name and character, accompanied by Moses’ renewed intercessory plea (vv. 5–9); the renewal of covenant stipulations with particular emphasis on separation from Canaan’s peoples and their worship (vv. 10–28); and the aftermath of Moses’ descent — his face radiant from proximity to God, requiring a veil except when he entered the LORD’s presence (vv. 29–35).

The chapter is not primarily about Israel’s repentance or Moses’ heroism. It is primarily about what the LORD does: He comes down, He passes before, He proclaims His own name, He makes covenant, He writes on the tablets, He causes Moses’ face to shine. Every major movement is initiated by God, and every theological weight falls on the character God declares in verses 6–7 — the most comprehensive self-description God gives anywhere in the Old Testament. That declaration (“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation”) is not incidental context — it is the theological center of the chapter and of the entire Sinai covenant renewal.

This Text — Intent

God intends to produce two things simultaneously in the reader through this chapter. First, He intends to ground the reader’s confidence for approaching Him — not in the reader’s worthiness or Israel’s track record, but in the LORD’s own character, which remains constant even after catastrophic covenant-breaking. The Israelites have forfeited every claim, yet the LORD descends, proclaims His name, and renews the covenant from the side of His own steadfast love and faithfulness. Second, He intends to produce holy seriousness — the character declaration does not end with grace; it includes the LORD’s refusal to clear the guilty, and the covenant stipulations that follow are demanding precisely because the LORD who graciously restores is the LORD who will not be trifled with. Israel’s restored relationship with God is not cheaper for having been repaired — it may be costlier. The shining of Moses’ face witnesses to both: proximity to this God

transforms; the veil witnesses to the mediated nature of the covenant and the ongoing gap between divine glory and human capacity to bear it unshielded.

Subject Sentence: The LORD renews broken covenant by grace, proclaiming His own name as the ground of Israel's hope.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that broken covenant does not exhaust His steadfast love — He restores not because Israel deserves it but because His own character (merciful, gracious, faithful, just) is the only foundation the covenant ever rested on. He calls His people to receive this restoration with both confidence and holy fear, because the One who forgives iniquity will by no means clear the guilty.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Name Declaration (vv. 6–7) — its function and weight

The central interpretive question is what the name proclamation in verses 6–7 is doing here and whether it balances grace and justice or whether one side controls the other. Arminian and broadly evangelical readings tend to emphasize the mercy attributes and treat the “will by no means clear the guilty” clause as a separate, secondary note — occasionally framing it as conditional (“those who do not repent”) in a way the text does not suggest. This softens the declaration's integrity and creates a false either/or between God's mercy and God's justice.

The Reformed reading insists the declaration is structurally unified: it is one proclamation of one God whose mercy is real and whose justice is equally real, and neither quality is contingent on the other. The mercy is not undermined by the justice, nor is the justice merely nominal. Crucially, this is *self-disclosure* — God is telling Israel who He is, not promising that Israel will receive only the mercy side and not the justice side. The point is that *both* together constitute why Israel can trust Him and why Israel must not presume on Him. The covenant renewal that follows is coherent only if both sides of the declaration are operative.

The Lutheran Law/Gospel reading correctly identifies the movement from the broken tablets (law exposed, sin revealed) to the renewed covenant (gospel of God's initiative), but risks an over-sharp separation in which the stipulations of verses 10–28 are heard primarily as burden or as mere framework rather than as the shape of covenant life under grace. The Reformed reading holds law and gospel together more tightly: the stipulations are the form that restored covenant life takes, not a relapse into merit-based obligation.

Moses' Veil (vv. 29–35) — Christological and canonical reading

Paul's use of this passage in 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 is the locus of the most significant interpretive decision in the chapter. Paul reads the veil as serving Moses' purpose of concealing the fading of the glory — a typological reading that sees the veil as emblematic of the old covenant's partial and transient nature compared to the unveiled glory of the new covenant in Christ. Some interpreters read the OT text as not originally intending anything about the fading of the glory, arguing Paul is doing midrashic expansion rather than straightforward exegesis. A more careful reading recognizes that Paul is not contradicting the Exodus text but is reading it with canonical eyes — the veil's function (keeping Israel from gazing at the full brightness, mediating access) points forward to a fuller unveiling. The Reformed reading embraces this Christological-canonical move as legitimate: Moses as mediator, the glory as real but bounded, and the veil as pointing to a day when the Spirit removes every barrier to beholding the LORD's glory with unveiled face (2 Cor. 3:18).

Covenant Stipulations (vv. 10–28) — separatism and its purpose

The detailed prohibitions regarding intermarriage and the destruction of Canaanite worship sites have generated moralistic readings that focus on the cultural or ethical dynamics of separation from pagan influence. While that application dimension is legitimate, the Reformed reading insists the theological engine of the prohibitions is the exclusive claim of the LORD on Israel's worship. The issue is not ethnic purity or social hygiene — it is covenant exclusivity. The LORD is a "jealous God" (v. 14), and jealousy here is covenant faithfulness vocabulary: the exclusive devotion appropriate to a marriage covenant. The prohibitions exist because the LORD will not share His people's worship with Baals and Asherim. Any exposition that reduces this to cultural separatism has missed the theological center.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 3:14-15** — The LORD's self-identification at the burning bush ("I AM WHO I AM... the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... this is my name forever") establishes that the divine name is not merely a label but a revelation of character; Exodus 34 is the fullest unpacking of what that name means — merciful, gracious, faithful, and just.
- **Numbers 14:17-19** — Moses intercedes for Israel after the spy catastrophe by explicitly quoting the Exodus 34:6-7 declaration back to God ("Now please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...'"). This demonstrates that the Name declaration was immediately understood as the ground of all future covenant intercession — it was remembered and wielded as the most load-bearing theological formula in Israel's prayer life.

- **Psalm 103:8-12** — David draws directly on the Exodus 34 declaration (“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”) to ground his confidence in God’s forgiveness — demonstrating the declaration’s function across the entire Old Testament as the theological bedrock of Israel’s hope before God.
- **2 Corinthians 3:7-18** — Paul’s reading of the veil passage canonically fulfills and transposes the entire chapter: Moses the mediator whose face shone but who veiled the glory gives way to Christ the mediator through whom the full, unfading glory of God is unveiled; the new covenant surpasses the old not by contradiction but by consummation.
- **John 1:14-17** — “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth... for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” John’s language is unmistakably Exodus 34 language (חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת / *hesed* and *emet* = grace and truth / steadfast love and faithfulness). Jesus is the final and full revelation of the Name proclaimed on Sinai — the glory Moses asked to see (Ex. 33:18) is the glory that becomes incarnate.

Aim: To show that God’s initiative in renewing broken covenant — grounded in His own proclaimed character, not Israel’s merit — is the only stable foundation for the believer’s confidence before God, and to guard that confidence from presumption by taking with full seriousness the same God’s declaration that He will by no means clear the guilty.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	The LORD commands Moses to cut two new tablets and ascend Sinai alone at dawn; no one may accompany him; the LORD promises to write again what was on the broken tablets	God initiates the restoration — He commands, He promises to write. Moses is active but responsive. “What was on the first tablets” — the covenant is renewed, not revised.
5	The LORD descends in a cloud and stands with Moses, proclaiming the Name	The theophany is controlled and purposeful — the LORD comes down to speak, not to destroy.
6–7	The LORD proclaims His own name: merciful, gracious, slow to anger,	The most theologically dense verse cluster in the Old Testament. The

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity/transgression/sin, but will not clear the guilty; visiting iniquity to third and fourth generation	declaration is bipartite — grace and justice held together by a single subject (“The LORD”). This is the theological center of the entire chapter and of Israel’s understanding of God.
8–9	Moses immediately bows in worship and intercedes: if I have found favor, let the LORD go in their midst, forgive iniquity and sin, and take Israel as His inheritance	Moses’ intercession is now grounded in the Name just proclaimed — he is asking God to be who He just said He is. This is biblical prayer at its most precise.
10	The LORD responds: “Behold, I am making a covenant” — He will do marvels never done in all the earth; Israel will see the LORD’s work	The covenant renewal is entirely the LORD’s initiative — “I am making.” The marvels are His. Israel is the beneficiary and witness.
11–13	Covenant stipulations begin: drive out Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites; make no covenant with them; tear down their altars, pillars, and Asherim	The covenant stipulations follow the grace — they are not the basis of renewal but its shape. The “no covenant with them” prohibition is worship-protection, not ethnic policy.
14	“For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”	The theological engine of all the prohibitions: exclusive covenant devotion. “Jealous” is here a divine name — not a weakness but a character attribute.
15–16	Warning against making covenant with Canaanites lest their daughters lure Israel’s sons into whoring after their gods	The spiritual trajectory is clearly named: intermarriage → syncretism → spiritual adultery. This is covenant-fidelity language.
17	“You shall make no cast	Brief but foundational — the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	idols”	second commandment renewed as a covenant stipulation.
18–26	Detailed festival, firstfruits, firstborn, and Sabbath stipulations: Feast of Unleavened Bread, firstborn males redeemed or broken, Sabbath rest, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Ingathering; “you shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk”	The rhythm of covenant life — worship, rest, offering, pilgrimage. Three times yearly the males are to appear before the LORD. These are not burdens but the ordered shape of covenant life. The milk/kid prohibition appears in its proper covenant context (not food-law abstraction).
27–28	The LORD commands Moses to write these words; Moses is on Sinai forty days and nights without eating or drinking; the LORD writes the Ten Commandments on the tablets	Both Moses and the LORD write — Moses writes the stipulations; the LORD writes the Ten Words. The forty-day fast parallels the original Sinai ascent.
29–30	Moses descends; the skin of his face shone because he had been speaking with God; Aaron and the Israelites were afraid to come near him	The glory is derivative — Moses’ face shines because of proximity to the LORD, not because Moses himself is glorious. The fear of the Israelites is appropriate and significant.
31–33	Moses calls them near; they return; Moses speaks with them and gives them the commandments; afterward he puts a veil over his face	The mediatorial structure: Moses speaks for God to the people; the veil goes on after the speaking is complete.
34–35	Whenever Moses went in before the LORD he removed the veil; when he came out he spoke what he was commanded; and the people saw his face shining; he would put the veil on again until he went in again	The rhythm is established: unveiled before God → speaks with unveiled face → veils afterward. The shining is real, recurring, and visible — the people see it repeatedly.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Broken Made New: God Commands Moses to Ascend Again
2	5–9	The Name Proclaimed: The LORD Declares His Own Character
3	10–28	The Covenant Renewed: Stipulations for a Restored People
4	29–35	The Glory Witnessed: Moses' Face and the Mediatorial Veil

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that broken covenant does not exhaust His steadfast love — He restores not because Israel deserves it but because His own character (merciful, gracious, faithful, just) is the only foundation the covenant ever rested on. He calls His people to receive this restoration with both confidence and holy fear, because the One who forgives iniquity will by no means clear the guilty.

Applications (Five)

1. When you have broken covenant with God through catastrophic sin, the ground you return to is not your repentance — it is His name. (*Mind/Belief*)

Israel did not earn renewed access to Sinai by demonstrating sufficient contrition. Moses did not ascend the mountain with a track record of national fidelity. He ascended because the LORD commanded it and because the LORD had proclaimed His own name as the basis of approach. The believer who has catastrophically failed — who has, in some real sense, shattered what should have been kept whole — returns not by demonstrating worthiness but by holding out the Name: “You said You are merciful. You said You are gracious. You said You abound in steadfast love.” This is what repentance actually is: not

convincing God you've changed, but throwing yourself on the character He has declared. The ground of restoration is always and only His name.

2. Do not receive the mercy half of the Name declaration without taking with equal seriousness the justice half. (*Mind/Belief*)

The declaration is one proclamation of one God. Every preacher and every congregation that hears “merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love” must also hear “will by no means clear the guilty” as part of the same breath, the same Name, the same God. Cheap grace — the assumption that the mercy clauses effectively cancel the justice clauses — is not merely theologically inaccurate; it misrepresents the character of the God who spoke these words on Sinai and whose character has not changed. Application: where you have softened the justice of God in your own heart to make His mercy more comfortable, you have fashioned a smaller god who is not the LORD. Return to the full name.

3. Let the renewed covenant produce exclusive devotion, not just relieved gratitude. (*Will/Behavior*)

The stipulations of verses 10–28 follow immediately on the grace of verses 5–9, and they are not a detour. They are the shape that restored covenant life takes with a God whose name is Jealous. The Israelites are not restored to a comfortable religion with loosely defined boundaries — they are restored to exclusive covenant with a God who will not share their worship with anything. The question the chapter puts to every restored sinner is: What altars in your life have you failed to tear down? What worship have you allowed to continue alongside your worship of the LORD? Restoration is not complete until the exclusive claim is honored.

4. Worship the God whose grace toward you is proportioned not to your faithfulness but to His own *hesed*. (*Affections/Worship*)

The word translated “steadfast love” (ḥesed / *hesed*) carries the force of covenant loyalty that does not fluctuate with the recipient's performance. Israel's faithfulness was zero when the LORD descended and proclaimed His name. His steadfast love was undiminished. This is not sentimentality — it is covenant character, and it is the most stabilizing truth in the Old Testament. The believer whose affections toward God rise and fall with their own performance record has not yet grasped what *hesed* means. God's love for you is not tracking your faithfulness — it is grounded in His own character. Worship that God. Let your heart rest in that love not because you have maintained it but because He declared it when you had forfeited everything.

5. Seek proximity to God — and expect that proximity to change you in ways visible to others. (*Affections/Worship*)

Moses did not know his face was shining. He did not engineer the glow or manage his luminescence for strategic effect. The shine was the unsought byproduct of standing in the LORD's presence and speaking with Him. The application is not “try to look holy” — it is

“seek genuine nearness to God and stop being surprised when it produces visible transformation.” The people saw the shine and they feared. Moses’ proximity to God was not a private affair — it had public witness. Christians who spend sustained time genuinely in the presence of God in Word and prayer are changed in ways others notice, often before the Christian notices them. Seek the face. The transformation follows.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 34 contains the most theologically comprehensive self-disclosure God makes of His own character anywhere in the Old Testament. In verses 6–7, the LORD declares Himself to be the unified integration of mercy and justice, grace and faithfulness, covenant love and holy refusal to compromise truth — and He declares this *as His own Name*, meaning it is not a description of what He sometimes does but of who He permanently is. This passage teaches that God’s grace is not a departure from His nature or a concession to human weakness — it is the active expression of His own *hesed* (steadfast love), which is covenant-loyal, persistent, and characterologically grounded. At the same time, the declaration guards against any reduction of God to merely a gracious deity by insisting in the same breath that He will by no means clear the guilty. The entire chapter teaches that covenant restoration is unilaterally God’s initiative (He descends, He proclaims, He writes, He causes Moses’ face to shine), which means that all ground for human boasting before God is removed — the covenant rests on His character, not on Israel’s faithfulness or Moses’ intercession, though both intercession and obedience are genuinely called for within the covenant relationship.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is, in several respects, the Old Testament’s deepest display of sovereign grace in covenant. The situation is maximally unfavorable: Israel has broken the covenant at its founding moment (the golden calf, ch. 32), the tablets have been shattered in tangible testimony to Israel’s failure, and Moses himself is the only human figure whose intercession has held the situation together. Yet the LORD renews the covenant not because Israel has recovered merit but because His own character — specifically His *hesed* — is not exhausted by human sin. This is the theological logic that runs directly into Reformation soteriology: justification is grounded entirely outside the sinner, in the character of God and the mediatorial work of the one who stands between God and the people. Moses as mediator — ascending where no one else may follow, veiling what the people cannot bear, speaking for God to those who cannot themselves approach — is the type that points to Christ, who is the better Moses, the unveiler of the Father’s glory (John 1:18), and the mediator of a new covenant whose glory does not fade (2 Cor. 3:11). The Reformed tradition’s insistence on God’s sovereign grace as the sole and sufficient ground of the believer’s standing before God finds its Old

Testament center not in a doctrinal proposition but in a story: a God who descends of His own initiative, proclaims His own name as the reason for covenant renewal, and writes the covenant's terms with His own hand.

Main Takeaway

The LORD renewed covenant with Israel not because Israel had earned it back but because His name — merciful, gracious, abounding in steadfast love, faithful, and just — is the only foundation the covenant ever rested on in the first place. That same name is the ground you stand on today. When you have broken what should have been kept whole, you do not return to God by assembling a case for your own improvement — you return by holding out His name and asking Him to be who He declared Himself to be. And you return soberly, because the same God who abounds in steadfast love will by no means clear the guilty — which means the cross of Christ, where the guilty were not cleared but were judged in the person of the Mediator, is the only place this story reaches its full resolution.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Truncating the Name declaration at the mercy clauses.** The single most common homiletical failure with this passage is to quote verses 6–7 and stop before “but who will by no means clear the guilty.” This is not merely an omission — it actively misrepresents the character of God the passage is proclaiming. Preachers and teachers must read the full declaration, explain why both sides are present in a single breath, and resist the pastoral temptation to soften the justice clause for the sake of comfort. The comfort this passage offers is not the comfort of a God who ignores guilt — it is the comfort of a God whose mercy and justice were both fully satisfied at the cross.
- **Making Moses the hero of the narrative.** Moses' intercession in chapters 32–33 is genuine, costly, and exemplary — but Exodus 34 does not allow Moses to carry the theological weight. God descends. God proclaims. God writes. God causes Moses' face to shine. Moses is the faithful mediator, but the chapter is not about what Moses accomplished through intercession — it is about what God accomplished through His own initiative. Sermons that center Moses' courage or Moses' prayer technique have shifted the gravitational center from God's character to human faithfulness.
- **Reducing the covenant stipulations to cultural or ethical separatism.** The prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites and the command to destroy their worship sites have generated readings that are primarily about cultural boundaries, ethnic distinctiveness, or social prudence. While the sociological dynamics are real, the theological engine is covenant exclusivity: the LORD is jealous (v. 14) and will

not share His people's worship with Baals and Asherim. Exposition must name the *worship* issue at the center of the prohibitions, or the application becomes mere moralism about avoiding bad influences.

- **Treating the renewed covenant as cheaper than the original.** There is a pastoral tendency to frame covenant renewal (after catastrophic failure) as grace-that-relaxes-the-terms — God is so merciful that restored sinners get a softer covenant. Exodus 34 does not support this. The same Decalogue is written on the new tablets. The stipulations of verses 10–28 are demanding and specific. The exclusive devotion is fully required. Restored covenant life is not less costly than original covenant life — it may be more costly, because the one who has been forgiven much now knows the full weight of what has been done for them.
- **Mishandling Paul's reading of the veil (2 Cor. 3) without canonical awareness.** Preachers who treat the Exodus 34 passage in isolation will miss Paul's canonical fulfillment, but preachers who import 2 Corinthians 3 into Exodus 34 without care risk anachronistically reading the OT text as if it is “really about” the new covenant in a way that collapses the genuine historical-progressive dimension. The proper handling: expound the Exodus 34 text on its own terms, name what the veil accomplishes in its own setting (mediated access, the people's incapacity to bear full divine glory), and then note — clearly labeled as canonical fulfillment — that Paul reads this typologically as pointing to Christ's unveiling of the Father's glory. The typology is real, but the type must not swallow the original historical event.
- **Leaving the shining of Moses' face in the realm of wonder without applicational force.** It is easy to treat verses 29–35 as a remarkable but finally decorative conclusion to the chapter. The shining is not decorative — it testifies that proximity to the living God produces real, visible, and unsought transformation. The veil testifies that even transformed human beings require mediation in approaching the divine glory. Both truths have direct applicational force: the pursuit of genuine nearness to God (not religious performance) as the means of Christlike transformation, and the humility of recognizing that all human mediation of divine glory — including Moses' — pointed forward to the Mediator who alone stands unveiled before the Father and brings His people with Him.