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From Rock to Cornerstone

During the American Civil War, the Union believed that a Boston widow, Lydia Parker Bixby, had lost five sons in the war. The Massachusetts governor brought her case to President Abraham Lincoln's attention. Lincoln personally wrote a letter of condolence.

It read in part: "I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming...I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

This letter was handwritten. Lincoln did not issue a public proclamation. He wrote a personal note. In an era flooded with military reports and casualty lists, this was intimate. It was brief, but weighty, fewer than 150 words. Yet it has been called one of the finest pieces of prose in American history.

Lincoln was not merely a grieving person; he was the President. His handwritten words carried the authority of

the office — but also the tenderness of a human being. It became symbolic. The original letter is lost, but copies were preserved. It has been memorized, engraved, and studied.

In 1963, Dr King wrote his famous letter, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” by hand on scraps of newspaper while imprisoned. That handwritten letter became one of the most influential moral documents of the 20th century. It wasn’t casual—it was costly, deliberate, and permanent. The letter defended his decision to lead nonviolent protests against segregation in Birmingham, explaining that injustice anywhere affects justice everywhere. He felt called to confront racism in one of the most segregated cities in America.

A central frustration for King was not the overt racist, but the “moderate” who prioritizes order over justice, preferring a false peace without tension rather than a true peace rooted in righteousness. He insisted that nonviolent protests do not cause violence, but reveals existing injustice. King champions love and nonviolence as the most powerful and morally faithful path forward. Though labeled an extremist, King embraced the term, aligning himself with biblical and historical figures who were extreme in their commitment to love and justice. As he stated, Jesus was “extreme” in his commitment to justice and love.

Dr. King, as part of his non-violent campaign described self-purification. ‘Purification’ — ‘*The cleansing of anger, selfishness and violent attitudes from the heart and soul in preparation for a nonviolent struggle.*’” If only purification happened before conversations between individuals, more listening and less violence would happen. Dr. King reminded us that our actions, directly, indirectly, with words or silence, have an impact and the power to either support humankind or oppose. We are “either part of the answer or part of the problem.” If it wasn’t for this handwritten letter from Dr. King in jail, we might not have some of these powerful reminders that we continue to need in our society.

A written note can be a special thing. This Christmas, as I opened a letter from my best friend I had tears streaming down my face, Madi proceeded to ask if I was okay. My best friend had written me a note of her thanks and gratitude for being there during a difficult year. Or this special jar that I received from my team partner at school, on the last day before I walked out the door for the last time. In it, 195 hand written notes, one for each day of the next school year that I wouldn’t be there. Notes written by current and former students and staff; a symbolism of a relationship.

Before we look more closely at the passage that was read for today let’s set up what’s been going on. Yahweh has delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians and they are on

their way to the promised land. Moses with the Israelites have now reached Mount Sinai. Sinai serves as the foundational site where God calls Israel from bondage into covenantal, priestly service, establishing them as a “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” (Exod 19:6). The mountain becomes the theological blueprint for the priesthood, tabernacle, and later the permanent temple in Jerusalem. Sinai was not only an important location in the history of Israel’s priesthood and tabernacle, but was the location where God made himself known to his covenantal people. It was the place of their salvation, where they were liberated to serve their deliverer. Sinai also functions as a “rock” of provision and protection. Before what we have read today, God has provided water from a rock at Rephidim (Exod 17:6) and shelters Moses in its cleft during a divine encounter, linking salvation, provision, and communion with God. The rock that sustained and protected Israel became a gateway to communion with God, a connection not experienced since Eden. These links to the Sinai rock are just some of the rich elements of the stone imagery the New Testament writers draw on when portraying Jesus and his church.

The verses at the beginning of Exodus 24, the Israelites have a willingness to do what the Lord has commanded. In Exodus 24:3 “Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people

answered with one voice, and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.”” Despite their grumblings and stressors on their journey, they gave immediate obedience to God’s words and will. They accepted God’s authority and will as He had shown through His faithfulness, love and saving power for them on their journey. Moses then built an altar with 12 stones as a pillar representing Israel, similar to what we have heard. These twelve stones were a witness that everyone was included with the promises and demands of the covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Even though only Moses and the elders were climbing the mountain all of Israel was part of this relationship.

As we read today in Exodus 24, Moses starts to climb Mount Sinai. When he reaches the edge of the cloud he stops and waits. How long?...6 days, being called up to God on the seventh day...It’s bringing back a bit of the creation story. The God who meets Israel at Sinai is the Creator of everything, the owner of the whole world and all nations. Second, it connects to Genesis: God’s work with Israel is like a new creation, restoring blessing, abundance, and purpose. Just as God made humans to rule and serve as priests, he calls Israel to be his people with a mission to help redeem a broken world. Sinai repeats the story of creation, showing God’s identity and Israel’s role in his plan.

Moses stays for forty days and forty nights. The Lord goes

into the details of the offerings for the tabernacle, the ark, the importance of the Sabbath amongst many other teachings. Then Scripture says, Exodus 31:18 “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”

The stone tablets are the physical embodiment of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, delivered before the tabernacle’s construction. Exodus says the tablets were “inscribed by the finger of God.” When Lincoln wrote, it mattered because of who he was. When God writes, it carries infinite authority. Lincoln’s letter comforted a grieving mother. God’s inscription formed an entire covenant people. If a brief handwritten note from a president can echo through history, what does it mean that the covenant was written by the finger of God Himself? It didn’t just say God spoke. It said he wrote. The personal nature of covenant—God is not distant; he inscribes his will.

As God says to Moses in Exodus 24:12 “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” When God says, I have written for their instruction, the phrase in Hebrew is “to teach them” and the verb, “torah” translated as law. While torah means law, it’s not just in the sense of legislation, but for

guidance and teaching. God is not giving Israel his law and commandments in a sense of legalism or for them to earn their own salvation, but to shape and guide their life as his people, such that they will fulfill his mission and goal for them as his priestly and holy people.

Ancient literacy emphasizes that biblical texts came out of a predominantly oral society. While we currently live in a society when many can read and write, this would have been the exception in the ancient east. Writing was considered mysterious, sometimes magical, and text that did exist often needed to be read aloud in community for individuals to know what was written.

The stones being written with the finger of God indicate the presence of God. His creative power, his involvement in human affairs. This is reiterated in Luke 11:20, when Jesus is talking to a crowd saying, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” The finger of God is only again associated with the presence of God, his power and authority and involvement in human affairs.

Through this covenant, God is shown as a writer to the Israelites. God doesn't just command, he writes. His finger is the writing instrument, there is no mediator between God and the written text. While Moses brings the tablets to the Israelites, the tablets are God's words, written by God. This is very different from the oral delivery of the law, when

Moses is the mediator, with no one else being able to approach God to receive God's direct words. In our day and age, the writing of something gives it more accessibility, but this is not the case of the ancient culture. The tablets retain a sense of mystery and distance from the people. Looking at what is written in the book of Exodus, it is a bit unclear of what is written on these tablets, even though we often associate them with the Ten Commandments from what we hear in Deuteronomy: are they the laws that we know of as the Ten Commandments, or the instructions for building and appointing the tabernacle? This remains ambiguous, and a debate, but that might be because it might not be the point of what is written on them, but rather what is center stage is the actual tablets. God personally inscribes on a permanent basis, words he audibly spoke to the people. Jewish tradition suggests the stones were sapphire-like stone, a durable stone to signify permanence. Have you ever thought about why two tablets of stone? If you're like me, you may have seen the movie from 1956 with Charlton Heston as Moses, "The Ten Commandments." Envisioning that half of the ten commandments were on one stone and the other half on the other, but this isn't the case. The full text was written on each tablet, one being God's copy, the other Israel's. This was the standard ancient Near Eastern treaty covenant practice (and similar to what we do today when each party has a copy of the written record). The two

tablets would be placed in the ark, whose role was the point of contact for God and His people. The place that represented their covenant relationship, especially through the law. By obeying the law, Israel stayed connected to Yahweh, and Yahweh remained connected to Israel.

Just as we see God as a writer, we also see God as a reader. As we heard a few weeks ago, Aaron is directed to wear select written words on his priestly garments. The names of Israel's twelve tribes engraved on stones worn by Aaron the high priest, the "stones of remembrance." When Aaron entered God's presence, he carried the names of the people on his shoulders and over his heart. The stones reminded both Aaron and God of the people and their covenant relationship. Aaron represented Israel before God, joining memory, worship, and God's will together. It was a reminder for Israel, but also a reminder to God of His relationship with the tribes and of the worthiness of their sacrifices.

When something is written, in order to realize its full potential, it needs to be read. Mieke Bal articulates how reading is the necessary partner to writing: "It is not enough, for writing to reach its destiny, that it be written in the presence of its intended reader; it must be actually read in order to accede to its full deployment as writing. Without the act of reading, writing remains a dead letter. In

other words, the reader is the subject of writing, responsible for its consequences, for the production of reality it designs.”

As we hear in Jeremiah 31:33 “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” it foretells the law written on their hearts, which we hear in 2 Corinthians 3:3 “and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” These stone tablets, embody divine authorship and covenant authority pointing ahead to a time when God’s will would be written within people’s hearts through new birth, a promise fulfilled after Christ’s resurrection and at Pentecost.

Throughout Scripture, rocks mark the physical and spiritual center of God’s communication with humanity. Dr. King wrote his famous letter by hand on scraps of newspaper while imprisoned. That handwritten letter became one of the most influential moral documents of the 20th century. It wasn’t casual—it was costly, deliberate, and permanent. God’s law was not casually spoken; it was deliberately inscribed. Words written in confinement changed a nation. Words written in stone formed a people. As Cameron Ward writes, “Reading is not just about

deciphering words on the page, but about engaging ideas, wrestling with paradoxes, and seeking out an encounter with God. Attention to the functions of writing in Exodus in particular also serves an important theological purpose, in that it highlights God's roles as both writer and reader. God the writer is lawgiver, judge, and record keeper; God demands our obedience and exhibits sovereign authority over us and all of creation. Yet, God the reader allows for reciprocity in God's relationship with humanity. Our writing and God's reading facilitate our shared relationship. This is in essence the nature of covenant itself: God and humanity enter into a relationship of disparate power, but mutual responsibility. The Bible also reminds us of the past and symbolizes God's authority over our lives, but those functions are not static. This writing, this book, helps to facilitate our encounter with God, not by its mere presence, but by our active engagement with its words and ideas. In order to be "living word" rather than "dead letter," the good book will always need good readers."

So what do we do with this?

The tablets were written by the finger of God. The covenant was not mass-produced. It was not dictated to a scribe. It was inscribed. Deliberate. Permanent. Authoritative. But the story does not end in stone. Because the same God who wrote on tablets would one day step into flesh.

John tells us, "In the beginning was the Word." Not the

tablet. Not the parchment. The Word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus is not merely another message from God — He is God's handwriting in human form. The living covenant. The visible inscription of God's heart.

The stone at Sinai formed a people. The stone rolled away from the tomb formed a new creation. And now — the writing continues.

Jeremiah said the law would be written on hearts. Paul said we are letters of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. If God is still writing, then we are part of the page.

The question is not simply, *What did God write?*
The question is, *Will we let Him write on us?*

Because stone tablets can sit in an ark. Letters can sit in an archive. But a heart written on by God becomes a living witness. Jesus is the Living Word — and we are sent as living letters.

So may our lives be readable. May our obedience reflect His authority. May our love reflect His character. May our presence carry His covenant faithfulness into the world. The God who once wrote on stone now writes through His Spirit. And the world is still reading. Will we let Him write on us?

Handwritten by God.
And sent.