

Encountering the Lord: *Moses and God's Glory* (Exodus 33:18-34:10)

“Do you have a hunger for God? If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because we have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. If we are full of what the world offers, then perhaps a fast might express, or even increase, our soul's appetite for God. Between the dangers of self-denial and self-indulgence is the path of pleasant pain called fasting.” ~ John Piper

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 33:18-34:10

A. Introduction

After the golden calf incident, the Lord declares that He will not go before the Israelites (Exod 33:3). Understanding the seriousness of their sin, the Israelites respond with great mourning. Consequently, Moses once again serves as an intercessor for the people. In turn, the Lord graciously accepts Moses' appeal (33:17). It is at this juncture in the narrative that our study begins. In what would seem as a rather out-of-place request, Moses asks to see the glory of the Lord. In a series of events, the Lord provides Moses with a greater clarity of His glory and demonstrates His grace and mercy to the Israelites through the renewal of the Covenant.

B. The Lord's Willingness to Reveal His Glory (33:18-23)

v. 18 - What exactly is Moses requesting from the Lord? Two major views exist:

- Moses is asking for a special revelatory experience from the Lord. Problems with this view entails the following: (1) this interpretation does not fit the immediate context; and (2) Moses knew that no one can see God's face and live (Exod 3:6).
- Moses is seeking confirmation from the Lord that He has not abandoned the Israelites. This fits with the previous manifestations of God's glory during times of crisis (Exod 16:10; 24:16-17). As noted by one commentator, “If God would again let Moses see his glory, he would know that all was well” (*Exodus*, 247).

vv. 19-20 - The typical understanding of the Lord's response is that the Lord withholds aspects of His glory from Moses. However, one could argue that the Lord was actually granting more than Moses had even asked for, not less (cf. Garrett, *Exodus*, 649).

Moses asks for God's glory, and the Lord, in turn, provides a lesson. This lesson did not pertain to His awesomeness or power, but rather, He granted Moses insight into His attributes (i.e., His goodness, His name, His grace, and His mercy). After all, what is the glory of God? “It is the weightiness of His being, the totality of His perfections” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 1040).

“grace” - unmerited favor.

“mercy” - compassion, often used in the care for someone who is helpless (e.g., a baby in the womb). Psalm 101:13 declares, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

The matter of “God showing favor toward those whom He favors” focuses on “God’s action of being compassionate and not on the process of choosing to whom he will show compassion” (Garrett, *Exodus*, 650). In other words, the Lord is reiterating His commitment to Israel, regardless of their failures.

The issue with seeing God’s face is not based on God’s inability, but rather, it is rooted in man’s inability to see God. As noted by Samson’s father, “We are doomed to die! We have seen God!” (Judg 13:22). As sinful creatures, we cannot withstand the full impact of viewing God’s power, purity, and holiness.

vv. 21-23 - God’s willingness to display His glory for Moses comes with provisions to protect Moses. The “back” could be seen as the “after effects” of His presence (cf. Kaiser, “Exodus,” 484).

C. The Lord’s Willingness to Renew His Covenant with Israel (34:1-10)

vv. 1-4 - In the same ceremonial regulations, the Lord will reissue the same covenant He made with Israel (cf. Exod 19:12-18).

v. 5 - “proclamation of the Lord by name” - This phrase indicates that God is about to reveal His identity. The content of this declaration is seen in verses 6-7.

vv. 6-7 - Once again, the Lord highlights His attributes. One scholar writes concerning Exodus 34:6-7, “Everything the Lord says autobiographically is something that God is or does for the benefit of others, especially his chosen people” (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 576).

“The Lord, the Lord.” - This phrase could be rendered “Yahweh, He is Yahweh” or “I am that I am.”

Observe the six ways in which Yahweh identifies Himself:

- “compassionate” - This term conveys deep sympathy and tender-hearted mercy (cf. Ps 103:8; 2 Cor 1:3).
- “gracious” - This word speaks of “a proclivity to respond favorably to cries of help and forgiveness” (Garrett, *Exodus*, 652) (1 Pet 5:10).
- “slow to anger” - Literally rendered “long nose,” the term indicates someone who is not easily angered or quick-tempered (2 Pet 3:9).
- “abounding in loyal love and faithfulness” - Something that is dependable and possesses integrity. This type of covenantal love means that the Lord’s love is loyal and steadfast. His love is boundless. The reference to “thousands” further indicates the inexhaustibility of His love (Zeph 3:17-18).
- “forgiving inquiry and transgression and sin” - The three terms for sin means that the Lord forgives all types or degrees of sin.
- “does not leave transgression and sin unpunished” This rendering would seem to contradict the previous clause. After all, if the Lord “by no means clears the guilt,” then all of us are lost. However, the phrase could speak of absolute amnesty. If this is the rendering, then the text is not allowing for pure indulgence nor the absence of repentance. Nor is the text suggesting there is no consequence for sin (cf. Garrett, *Exodus*, 640, fn. 39). As a righteous and just God, He cannot allow sin to go unpunished (Deut 32:4).

According to one scholar, these verses indicate “a theology of the grace of God unsurpassed in the OT [Old Testament]” (Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 90).

vv. 8-9 - In this fifth prayer recorded since the incident with the golden calf, Moses responds to God’s character by falling to the ground and worshiping the Lord. Note that Moses also now includes himself with the Israelites—that is, a people who are sinful.

v. 10 - The Lord answers Moses’ prayer by reiterating His promise of His covenant with Israel. Interestingly, the language is similar to the words contained in the hymn of praise after God’s deliverance at the Red Sea in Exodus 15:11. In other words, prior events, such as the crossing of the Red Sea, are only a foreshadow of God’s future provisions for Israel.

II. Intersect

A. While spiritual experiences can be exciting, they are not always dependable. If we want eternal spiritual transformation, then we must gain insight into the character of God.

Ephesians 1:17-19 -

B. As followers of Jesus, we need to take comfort and rejoice in knowing that we serve a God who is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Ephesians 3:18-19 -

C. No sin is too great for God’s forgiveness. As followers of Jesus, we do not need to be shackled by false guilt or a fear that God’s forgiveness is inaccessible.

1 John 1:9 (also, cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19) -

“The more clearly we see the infinite chasm between God’s glory and our sinful falling short thereof, the greater will be our appreciation of His grace and love in bridging that gulf to redeem us.” ~ David Hunt