



Exodus - Chapter Thirty Three

II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai (continues)

II.f Exodus 32:1-34:35 - Covenant Breach, Intercession, and Renewal (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Three

After the incident with the golden calf (32:1-35), this chapter narrates the tension of the events as the Lord says he will not go among his people (vv.1-6), and the existence of a temporary tent of meeting raises questions about the future of the tabernacle (vv.7-11). It is in this context that Moses continues to mature in the role of covenant representative as he intercedes again for the people of Israel (vv.12-23), as he did in 32:9-14.

II.f.ii Exodus 33:1-23 - Moses Intercedes for the People

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.f.ii.1 Exodus 33:1-6 - The Command to Leave Sinai

The Lord instructs Moses to lead the people toward the land of Canaan and promises again that an angel will go before them, but because Israel is a stiff-necked people, the Lord says that he will not go up among them, so as not to destroy them. When Moses intercedes on Israel's behalf, he will ask that the Lord go with Israel particularly because of their condition and their need for his pardon.

¹ The Lord said to Moses, 'Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "To your descendants I will give it."' ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and

honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.’

Exodus 33:1-3

Go, leave this place, go to the land, “To your descendants I will give it.” After the sin of the golden calf, God did not deny the children of Israel the Promised Land. He said they could continue on to possess what he had promised to them and to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: <<*Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him*>> (Genesis 12:7).

I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites. After the sin of the golden calf, God did not deny Israel his protection. He promised to be with them in some way, i.e. I will send an angel, and to fight for them in the Promised Land. Isaiah 63:9a looks back at the Exodus, and says: <<*in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them*>>. The angel of his presence describes the presence of God with his Israel in Exodus 23:20-23, the angel that had the name of God in him. The angel described here in v.2 was simply an angelic being, not the Lord himself.

I will not go up among you. God did say he would deny Israel his presence, or at least the near sense of his presence. It might be conjectured that God said, ‘I will not stay so close to you, because I might judge you along the way, but go on and take the Promised Land.’ This was a challenge to Moses and the nation as a whole. God told them they could have the Promised Land, but he would not remain with them in a close, personal way. If they were satisfied with that arrangement, it would prove they only loved God’s blessings and not God himself. If they challenged God, pleading with him for his presence, not only his blessings, it would show a genuine heart for God himself. This was the first step towards spiritual restoration and revival in Israel.

⁴ When the people heard these harsh words, they mourned, and no one put on ornaments. ⁵ For the Lord had said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do to you.”’ ⁶ Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onwards.

Exodus 33:4-6

They mourned, and no one put on ornaments. This was a good response on behalf of Israel. To them it was bad news. They mourned the potential loss of God’s close presence. They cared about their relationship with the Lord, not only

what he could give them. This was a significant issue for Israel, because they could see the presence of the Lord in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. If God withdrew his presence it could be clearly seen. They mourned here because with the golden idol they could not have their fun obediently and responsibly. It was good for them to be sad for a while.

You are a stiff-necked people. This phrase is repeated again. The idea is not only were the people stubborn, but that they stubbornly resisted God. The picture is of an ox or donkey resisting the farmer and making its neck stiff, a test of will.

Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onwards. The people displayed their repentance and mourning by not wearing their ornaments. They knew this was not the time for decorating the external, but it was time to bring the heart right with God. This was the second step towards spiritual restoration and revival in Israel.

II.f.ii.2 Exodus 33:7-11 - The Tent outside the Camp

The description of this tent of meeting being located far off and outside the camp contrasts with the description of the tabernacle as the place where the Lord was to 'dwell in their midst' (25:8). This section steps off the main story line and introduces tension in the narrative related to how the covenant breach in Chapter 32 and the Lord's response (vv.1-6) will affect the existence of the sanctuary that has been described.

The remainder of the section hangs with expectant hope in light of the Lord's abiding presence in the pillar of cloud and the continued relationship with Moses, to whom he speaks face to face. The people's focus on Moses whenever he would go in and out of the camp foreshadows the way that his intercession will be the means by which the Lord commits himself to come back into their midst.

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.

Exodus 33:7

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. After Israel's heart was turned towards God and after they humbled themselves by removing their ornaments, Moses took the next step towards revival and restored relationship. He initiated a determined effort to seek God, making his own tent a tabernacle of meeting. God told Moses to make a tabernacle of meeting when Moses was on Mount Sinai (Exodus Chapters 25-28). However, the tabernacle was not built yet. This would not stop Moses from taking extraordinary measures to seek God. He determined to make his own tent a

tabernacle of meeting. This was not something that Moses organised or planned or strategised. He sought God, radically and spontaneously. When Moses did that, God touched the hearts of the people.

Everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting. By making the place of worship outside the camp, Moses clearly drew a line to see who really wanted to draw close to the Lord. When Moses put the temporary tabernacle of meeting outside the camp, it meant that everyone who wanted to seek the Lord had to separate in some sense. It can perhaps be assumed that not everyone wanted to do this.

⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents.

Exodus 33:8-10

Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand. The people watched and noticed when Moses worshipped. When Moses worshipped, they also worshipped. Moses prompted the people to draw close to God by his own example.

The pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent. Moses' tent did not become the tabernacle of meeting simply because he named it so. It became that because God actually came there to meet Moses, displayed by the pillar of cloud: *<<and the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent>>* (Deuteronomy 31:15), and: *<<He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them>>* (Psalm 99:7). The pillar of cloud became like the flag of royalty or of an admiral indicates that they are present, so the pillar of cloud indicated the presence of God. Everyone saw this pillar of cloud come to the tent of Moses, and they knew Moses worshipped and met with God there. This was a great comfort to the people, to know that their leader really did meet with God and hear from him.

The Lord would speak with Moses. There is much written about God talking with Moses, but not much what God said is revealed. There was probably much more said than what is recorded in this chapter, and probably much of it was of a personal, strengthening nature to Moses.

All the people would rise and bow down. This was their natural response. Something about Moses and his relationship with God made others want to also worship God.

¹¹ Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

Exodus 33:11

Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Numbers 12:8 clarifies what this meant. There God contrasted how he spoke to Moses with how he spoke to other prophets; Moses heard clearly and plainly, and other prophets heard in dreams and visions. It is also possible this meant that God appeared to Moses in human form, as he did to Abraham in Genesis Chapter 18. More likely, the phrase face to face is simply a figurative expression, meaning free and open fellowship. Moses had not and could not see the actual face of God the Father in his glory. No one has seen the face of God the Father in glory, and this is why Jesus declared: *<<Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father>>* (John 6:46), and John wrote: *<<No one has ever seen God>>* (1 John 4:12a), which Paul also confirms: *<<It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen>>* (1 Timothy 6:16).

But his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent. The personal revival in the life of Moses was an example to the entire nation, but it was a special example to his servant Joshua. When Moses drew close to God it also drew Joshua close to God, so much so that Joshua did not leave the tabernacle.

II.f.ii.3 Exodus 33:12-23 - Moses' Intercession

Moses again interceded on behalf of the people and, because Moses had remained faithful, God graciously agreed to accompany the people once more on their journey into the Promised Land. Moses then asked to see God's glory, which the Lord agreed to in part.

¹² Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight."¹³ Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.'

Exodus 33:12-13

Moses intercedes again on behalf of the people and appeals both to the special relationship that he has with the Lord and to the fact that this nation is your people. Although God has drawn back from destroying all the people, he has promised only to send an angel to lead them into the land. This is not sufficient for Moses, who passionately requests that the Lord himself accompany them (v.15). God accepts his plea, and his presence is demonstrated personally to Moses in 33:17-34:28 and publicly by the construction of the tabernacle in Chapters 35-40.

But you have not let me know whom you will send with me. For Moses, it was not enough to know that he and Israel would make it to the Promised Land. In his estimation, the Promised Land was nothing special without the special presence of the Lord. God previously promised to send an angel with Israel (v.2). Moses pressed God on this point, wanting to know exactly whom God would send. This was bold, courageous and almost rude; Moses was drawing nearer to God. Moses was determined to have God's presence with Israel as close as possible. This was the next step towards revival and restoration of Israel's relationship with God.

I know you by name. This simple statement is a clear indication of the personal relationship that God wants to have with his people: <<*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me*>> (Isaiah 49:1), <<*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep*>> (John 10:14-15), <<*But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his', and, 'Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness'*>> (2 Timothy 2:19).

Now if I have found favour in your sight. Moses was bold in drawing near to God, but he based the boldness on the grace God had already shown to him. This was a good ground for drawing near.

Your sight, your ways, your people. Moses was almost obsessed with God. He was still on earth, but he connected everything to God in heaven. Another strong theme in this section is to know. In some form, the word is used repeatedly in these verses. In the sense of relationship, God knew Israel and Moses, and Moses wanted to know God.

¹⁴ He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

¹⁵ And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.'

Exodus 33:14-16

My presence will go with you. God seemed to answer Moses' prayer, but Moses did not rest. He continued to press God for affirmation of the promise. This shows how boldly Moses sought after God for the sake of his own relationship with God and for the benefit of the nation. My presence will go with you is literally 'My face will go with you.' This aids understanding as to what it means when it says Moses met with God face to face (32:11). It has the sense of 'in the immediate presence of God.'

I will give you rest. The presence of God means rest and peace in life. This was an important and necessary gift from God to Moses and Israel. It was a gift that remained with the people despite their frequent apostasy: <<*For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their saviour in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old*>> (Isaiah 63:8-9), and: <<*Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, I am with you, says the Lord*>> (Haggai 1:13).

If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. Moses continued his bold way of speaking with God. God had just promised his presence; Moses responded by cautioning God of the consequences of not keeping his promise.

For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? Moses knew that nothing the Lord could give them would make them truly different from the nations. Only the strong presence of the Lord himself could do that. Moses wanted something for Israel that would show that they were not just like all the other nations and that could only be the unique, powerful presence of their God. Israel's relationship with Yahweh, a unique example of ethical monotheism in the ancient world, did make them different from all other ancient peoples. God among them made them different. It was important for Israel to know this for themselves; it was also important for the other nations to know this as well.

¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'

¹⁸ Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.'

Exodus 33:17-18

I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name. God honoured the bold intercession of Moses, and he promised to restore his relationship with Israel. It is an example of what can be achieved through heartfelt prayer: <<*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the*>>

Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name>> (John 15:16), and: <<Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective>> (James 5:16).

Moses' request to see the Lord's glory should be interpreted primarily in light of his role as covenant representative on behalf of the people and not simply as for the sake of his own experience however much he desired it as a personal blessing. In response to the Lord saying that he will go with his people, Moses is asking him to signify his presence as he did when the covenant was confirmed at Mount Sinai and maybe even more particularly to pledge that he will dwell among his people in the tabernacle so that both it and the people would be 'sanctified by his glory' (29:43-46).

¹⁹ And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' ²⁰ But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.'

Exodus 33:19-20

The Lord's words appear to be a response to Moses' requests that the Lord would show him his ways (v.13) and his glory (v.18). The description points forward to the event of the Lord's self-declaration that is to come: I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord", I will be gracious, and will show mercy (34:5-6). Paul cites this in Romans 9:15 to show that, when God shows mercy, it is because he has chosen to do so.

You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live. God would not and could not literally show Moses his face. This aids understanding as to what was meant in v.11 when it said: << *the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend*>>.

²¹ And the Lord continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'

Exodus 33:21-23

See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock. God was about to reveal himself to Moses in a unique way. God prepared the event carefully, giving

Moses a specific place to stand. Later, Elijah met God in what may have been the same place; refer to 1 Kings 19:8-18.

While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock. God's glory could not remain in front of Moses; it had to pass by him. Even with that, Moses had to be protected by the hand of God and the cleft of the rock when the glory of God passed before him.

This is a vivid and endearing image: protected both by the hand of God and hidden away in the rock of refuge he provides. The shelter in the cleft of the rock gave the image for Augustus Toplady in his famous hymn Rock of Ages:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me;
Let me hide myself in Thee.

Protected by God, Moses could endure the glory of God passing before him. Isaiah had a glimpse of the glory of God, and it moved him to mourn his own sin and unworthiness (Isaiah Chapter 6). John experienced some of the glory of God and fell at the feet of Jesus like a dead man (Revelation 1:17). Paul experienced the glory of God on the Damascus Road, but also in the experience described in 2 Corinthians Chapter 12. It was such an amazing experience that he could only barely describe it.

What many people speak of today as the presence and the glory of God seems very trivial compared to what Moses and these others experienced. There is no weight to their experience of glory. Believers should have an earnest desire to experience God deeply. Paul made it clear that people cannot fully see the glory of God, they see it as in a piece of polished metal, dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), but they can at least see something of it. Paul did not say they see nothing of the glory of God, only that they cannot fully see it or comprehend it.

Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. Moses could only see God's back, described with a unique term often not used for anatomy. The idea is that Moses could only see behind God, not God himself. With these special protections, God rewarded the desire of Moses to see his glory as much as humanly possible. This demonstrates that God rewards the seeking heart. And as marvellous as this experience was for Moses, it still cannot compare to the revelation of God given to the world in Jesus Christ: <<***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth***>> (John 1:14), <<***And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit***>> (2 Corinthians 3:18).