

Bible Study # 60 Exodus 33.12–23 04–16–2021

God's revelation of His own glory has already been referred to on several occasions in Exodus (see 16:7; 24:15–18; 29:43). Now another incident is related in which Moses received a special manifestation of that glory while hidden in a rock at Sinai.

The description contains anthropomorphic terms (God has 'a face', 'a hand', and 'a back'), but the resulting revelation, and the declaration accompanying it, was a supreme manifestation of God's character (34:5–9).

Moses' request for God to be with the people in their journeying (vv. 13–16) received an abundant answer. 12–13 Moses had already been told that God was going to send His angel before the people (23:20), but he wanted confirmation of this in the announcement of the name of the person. He was anxious as to how God was going to deal in the future with His people who had sinned so seriously over the golden bull.

He recognized that he was in a special relationship with the LORD, for God 'knew' Moses and his grace had reached out to him. The concept of knowledge is important in these verses, occurring six times in verses 12–17. The verb is used here in accordance with its common usage of knowledge of God by humans, and also his knowledge of them.

Moses was known by name (i.e., chosen for a special purpose), and he asked for a revelation to him of God's ways in order that he might be assured that God's grace had brought him into a special and favored relationship with the LORD.

Psalms 103:7 is a comment on this request, as it affirms that God did make His ways known to Moses. A further consideration that Moses pressed on the Lord was that Israel was 'his people', those who had been brought up out of Egypt.

God's response was in terms of what is recorded in 23:20–21. Literally, the Hebrew has 'my face will go'. This seems to have been an assurance that God's essential being would accompany Moses on the way to Canaan. The phrasing appears to differentiate between Moses and the rest of Israel, for the statement is second person singular: 'My presence will go with you (2nd mas. single), and I will give you (2nd mas. single) rest.'

One of the ways that the Old Testament describes the blessing of Canaan is by speaking of 'rest' in the land. That rest would be important in itself, but it would also send the message that migration was over for Israel, and the people now could look forward to a sedentary pattern of life.

The language may reflect God's attitude to His sinful people, and also the unique intimacy that Moses had with Him (cf. also the very rare use of the phrase 'to find favor in God's sight', one used too of Noah in Gen. 6:8). The way ahead, as far as Moses was concerned, depended on the divine presence being with them. It would have been better to stay where they were if they were to not have God's presence.

Another argument put forward by Moses was that the presence of the LORD was going to be proof of the fact that God had chosen Israel to be His own people. Israel was differentiated from all other people groups by divine election.

The LORD's response to Moses' request was an assurance that He would carry it out. The NIV rendering of the clause, 'because I am pleased with you', obscures the fact that the Hebrew here ('to find favor in the eyes of someone') is the same as has already occurred in verse 12. It is preferable to retain the same idiom in the English of both verses (as is done in many other English translations, including the AV, NASB, NKJV, RSV, and ESV).

The final sentence of the verse, ‘and I know you by name,’ is also a repetition of what was said in verse 12. It is a reminder of the close relationship forged between God and His servant Moses.

A further request of Moses was for a revelation of God’s glory. The promise was given that God would cause ‘all his goodness’ to pass before him. It is hard to be sure whether ‘goodness’ has its full covenantal significance here, namely, of the things promised in a covenant, or whether it is used in a general sense of the many blessings that flow from God’s presence.

The former is the more likely as mention is made of the proclamation of God’s covenant name, yhwh. To declare his name meant a revelation of his nature and character, just as Jesus later was to manifest God’s name to those whom he had been given out of the world (John 17:6).

The answer to Moses’ prayer is given in the following chapter (34:5–7). The words that follow are an emphatic assertion of God’s prerogatives in relation to showing mercy and compassion. He could show mercy to his erring people in accordance with his divine will.

The apostle Paul took up this quotation in Romans 9:14–15 as he wrote about the possible injustice of God, seen in the election of Jacob and not Esau. To the question, ‘Is God unjust?’, he answered with the strongest negative, ‘Not at all!’ before going on to quote Exodus 33:19. The point was that God’s mercy was not a matter of justice at all. Rather it is determined by the free grace of God, freely given.

In Exodus 33, this reference to the bestowal of mercy is followed by God’s reminder to Moses that no one can see his face, for looking at his glory (a manifestation of his holiness) in that way causes death. The revelation of his glory was going to have this one restriction—there was to be no seeing of his face.

The New Testament makes it clear that part of the significance of the incarnation of Jesus is that he is the revelation of the Father whom men could see and yet not die (John 1:18; 6:46; 1 John 4:12).

In vs. 21–23 we find further details about the impending revelation of God’s glory. Moses is to draw near to God (lit. ‘with me’) and to station himself on a rock. He is to be hidden in a cleft of the rock while God’s glory passes by. While ‘face’ and ‘hand’ are used quite commonly of God, this is the only place in the Masoretic Text where God refers to His ‘back’.

The idea is that God will so protect his servant that, in experiencing his presence and seeing some manifestation of his glory, Moses will not die as a result. While in English translation we need to retain ‘my back’, yet we understand it as indicating ‘“the after-effects” of his radiant glory’.

Our next study takes us to Exodus 34:1–9.