

The People Repent; Moses Asks to See the Lord's Glory

Exodus 33

Exodus 33 – *“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’”² And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”*

⁴ And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. ⁵ For the Lord had said to Moses, ‘Say to the children of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.’”⁶ So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb.

⁷ Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. ⁸ So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. ⁹ And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. ¹⁰ All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. ¹¹ So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

¹² Then Moses said to the Lord, “See, You say 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 grace in My sight.’”¹³ Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people.”¹⁴ And He said, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵ Then he said to Him, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth.”¹⁷ So the Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.”¹⁸ And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.”¹⁹ Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”²⁰ But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”²¹ And the Lord said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. ²² So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. ²³ Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

Background Notes

In Exodus 32 we had the sad incident of the golden calf. There we saw the idolatry and immorality of the people as they danced, completely out of control, around the golden calf. In his wrath Moses broke the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments, symbolic of the broken covenant. In that chapter we also saw the intercession of Moses for the people and the discipline and judgment of God, as many of the people died both by sword and by plague.

In chapter 33 God told Moses that He would not go on in their midst to the land of Canaan, but He would send an angel to lead the way. When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning and took off their ornaments and jewelry, a sign of penitence and reformation. So, there was a measure of repentance. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before the people went back to the sins, and these sins resulted in their 40 years of wilderness wanderings.

In verse 7 we read about a "Tent of Meeting" that Moses pitched outside the camp of Israel. This was not the Tabernacle with the Holy of Holies -- that wasn't constructed yet. The Tent of Meeting was a temporary tent where the Lord would meet with Moses and speak to him from the midst of the pillar of cloud. Notice verse 7: *"And Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance away, calling it the Tent of Meeting. Anyone who wanted to inquire of the Lord went out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp."*

The phrase *"outside the camp"* reminds us of Hebrews 13:12-13, doesn't it? Let's read those verses: *"Wherefore Jesus, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the camp. Therefore let us go forth to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach."* Do you see the spiritual picture? Just as the people who wanted to seek the Lord went outside the camp to the Tent of Meeting in Moses' day, so we who would seek the Lord's presence today must go outside the camp, separating ourselves from everything in this world that opposes the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. There are different degrees of guidance from the Lord.

At first God said that He would not go up to the land of Canaan in the midst of His people, but instead, He would send an angel before them to lead the way. This was obviously a lower level or lesser degree of guidance, wasn't it? After the people repented, and Moses prayed and requested the Lord to change His mind, the Lord said, *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest"* (v14). And in verse 17 God confirmed His personal guidance.

So we see that there were "degrees" of guidance from the Lord. This was not based on the Lord's ability, but on the people's commitment. Because of the people's sin and lack of commitment, the Lord at first said He would only guide them with one of His angels, and not by His personal presence. That's not exactly the same degree of guidance, is it?

And this principle is still true today. The Lord promises to give us guidance (see Proverbs 3:5-6 and Psalm 32:8). Those are great promises! But we can't expect the same degree of guidance from the Lord if we're not willing to be committed – if we're not willing to put the Lord first in our lives. Read Romans 12:1-2. These verses teach us that when we present our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord, and when we don't allow the world to squeeze us into its mold, it is then that we come to know what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God for our lives. There are different degrees of guidance from the Lord.

2. There are different degrees of fellowship with the Lord.

In verse 11 we read that the Lord spoke to Moses *“face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”* But then in verse 20 God said to Moses, *“You cannot see My face; for no man can see me and live.”* Are these verses in contradiction with one another? No! The idea in the figurative phrase, “face to face” is that Moses had direct, unhindered fellowship with God.

Joshua lingered at the tent of meeting (v11). What does this mean? It may just mean that he stayed to protect the tent, or care for the tent. But, on the other hand, it may be an indication that Joshua sought for a deeper level of fellowship with the Lord.

Certainly the degree of fellowship with the Lord that Moses enjoyed was greater than the average believer of that day. In Numbers 12, when Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, God said to them: *“Listen to My words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you. I reveal Myself to him in visions; I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses...with him I speak face to face....”* (v6-8). And in Exodus 33:17 the Lord said to Moses, *“...for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.”* Here is another indication that Moses enjoyed a greater degree of fellowship with the Lord than others.

In verse 18, When Moses requested to see the glory of the Lord, His request was granted – but not fully. However, because of Moses' close fellowship with the Lord, he certainly experienced more of the glory of the Lord than any other believer at that time. Moses saw a visible manifestation of the Lord in His glory, but not His full glory (v22-23). This is not a contradiction to John 1:18, which says, *“No man has seen God at any time;”* or of 1 Timothy 6:16, which says, *“[God] alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.”*

All these verses can be harmonized by coming to understand that no one has seen the essence of deity at any time. However, some people have had the great privilege of seeing a visible appearance of God, when God has chosen to assume an outward form. This is known as a *theophany*.

So we see that Moses enjoyed a different degree of fellowship with the Lord than other believers of his day. Again, the degree of our fellowship with the Lord is not limited by God, but by us. It's limited by the degree of our commitment to Him! Listen to the exhortation of the Lord to the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:20: *“Behold, I stand at the door and*

knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and commune with him, and he with Me." The door here is not the "door of salvation" -- it is the "door of fellowship." Greater fellowship with the Lord is available if we will hear His voice and open the door. There are different degrees of fellowship with the Lord.

Practical Application

If the Lord will not go, then don't go!

In verse 15 Moses said to the Lord, *"If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here."* In other words, Moses was saying, "Lord, if you won't go with us, then we don't want to go!" Now that's a great attitude, and it has many applications. If the Lord wouldn't go to that movie you think you'd like to see, then don't go! If the Lord wouldn't watch that TV show, then don't watch it! If the Lord wouldn't read that book or magazine, then don't read it! If the Lord wouldn't go to that website, then don't go!

This principle can be applied to Christian service and family life, as well. If the Lord wouldn't go along with your selfish and self-serving methods and plans for your fellowship, or your ministry, or your family, then don't go! Change directions! Get your act together with the Lord. Get back in the will of God for your life. If the Lord will not go, then don't go!