

Sermon 118, Peniel, Exodus 34:29-35

Proposition: God's glory shines in the Mediator's face.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night before Jacob encountered Esau, he split up his flocks and herds and children and sent them to safe locations. "Then," Moses tells us,

Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks."

But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

So He said to him, "What is your name?"

He said, "Jacob."

And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.”

And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” (Genesis 32)

I tell you this story because Jacob got to see the face of God. The text implies that it was the face of the Man who wrestled with him. In that man’s face, Jacob saw the face of God. It is a clear foreshadowing of the coming of the God-man, the man whose face is God’s face. Our text this evening contains another clear foreshadowing of the coming of the God-man. The face of Moses was not God’s face, and did not become God’s face. But it was a face resplendent with the glory of God. God’s glory shone in Moses’ face. That in itself is really cool, and one sense the truth contained in that statement is plenty enough for us to chew on tonight: God’s glory shines in the Mediator’s face.

But there’s even more in this text, for when we read Paul’s inspired commentary on it in 2 Cor. 3, we see further that Moses’ glory was comparatively puny and short-lived; it was being brought to an end. Yet the glory of Moses glorifies the glory of Christ. The glory that shone on Moses is swallowed up by the glory that shines in the Mediator of the New Covenant. Look at that glory tonight, and see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jacob saw God’s face and lived; in this sermon, you will too.

I. The Mediator’s Glory, vv. 29-31

Moses has been on Mount Sinai a long time — at least forty days, possibly a total of eighty days since the golden calf incident. He has been baking in the glorious presence of God for over a month, maybe closer to three months.

A. His Face Sent Out Rays of Light

When he comes down the mountain, his face is sending out glory rays. It glows with the energy of the glory of God. We should think of this as some kind of visible light. The text uses the word “horns,” which can refer to “horned rays” as in Habakkuk 3:4: “He had rays flashing from His hand.” The word reflects the context of the golden calf. Who are you going to go with? The horned idol, or the “horned” mediator? Which one actually shines with the uncreated glory of the Almighty?

It was not Moses’ whole body that glowed like molten bronze (cf. John’s vision of the risen Christ in Rev. 1), but only his face. Even that was amazing. This is the penultimate answer to Israel’s request for a god to go before them. They wanted a god they could see; in response, Yahweh gave them a mediator they could see — a mediator who would bear the glory of God in himself.

B. The Glory Scared Aaron & Israel

This turned into a classic case of “Be careful what you wish for.” When Aaron and the children of Israel saw Moses’ glowing face, they were afraid to get near him. Brothers and sisters, the

message sent by the visible glory of God is not “delight!” but “danger!” When you see even a reflected, second-hand version of the glory of God, your first thought is “Stand back!” Aaron had seen the glory of God before, when he ascended the mountain with the seventy elders and they saw God and ate and drank. But even he did not come right up and say “I was made to see the glory of God. I love it!” He hung back.

C. Israel Returned when Moses Called

That said, the glory was a very attenuated version. Aaron and company did not have to fall on their faces when they saw it. It still scared them and made them unwilling to approach Moses. But when he called — “Hey, everyone, what’s the deal? You still feeling guilty about the calf?” — they were able to overcome their reticence and approach him. It is interesting to notice once again that Moses debriefs with Aaron and the rulers of the congregation. It seems that all Israel was still rather nervous about approaching a man who shone with the glory of the Almighty. But the leaders were able to handle it.

Now, if the story stopped there, we would still be able to say “The mediator shines with the glory of God.” But as I said a moment ago, there is a great deal more than that in this passage.

II. The Mediator’s Message, v. 32

The mediator not only stood there shining; he opened his mouth and spoke. The revelation is not merely visible, but verbal as well. What does the mediator reveal? “He commanded them to do everything that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai” (Exo 34:32). The mediator reveals the commands of God as well as shining with the glory of God. The Great Commission springs to mind. Jesus says that the main task of the church is to teach the nations to do everything that He commanded.

In other words, as mediator, Moses was already doing what Jesus would later do. He was relaying God’s commands to the world, and insisting that they be obeyed. The glory highlighted the trustworthiness of the mediator and the goodness of the law he brought.

III. The Mediator’s Veil, vv. 33-35

But that said, the story does not stop there. Moses debriefs with Aaron and the elders about what God told him on Sinai — and then he puts on a veil.

A. Its Use: To Conceal the Mediator’s Glory

Verse 35 associates the wearing of the veil with the glory of his face. It implies that the purpose of the veil was to conceal the mediator’s glory as he went about his business.

1. Unveiled before the LORD

That said, Moses was always unveiled before the LORD. He was not trying to hide his face from God.

2. Unveiled before the congregation

Nor was he trying to hide his face from the congregation. He always took the veil off when speaking to them. This is not like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Minister’s Black Veil,” in which a New England Puritan minister starts wearing a veil 24/7 and keeps it on until the day of his death. That minister was hiding his face. Moses was not hiding his face.

3. Veiled when not speaking

He only wore the veil when not talking to anyone. When he was sitting alone, or walking around silently, he was veiled. In other words, he was not hiding himself, but God's glory.

I'm tempted to go full Origen on this passage and read the text as implying that the Mediator not only shines with the glory of God, but also conceals the glory of God when not actively communing with God or with God's people. If you just saw Moses walking around, you wouldn't say "There is someone who bears the glory of God." The veil was apparently designed to prevent that from happening. Just as Jesus Christ walked among us incognito, appearing to everyone as a very ordinary man (at least until He opened His mouth), so Moses walked among Israel incognito. He was not interested in looking like a god among men — just as Jesus manifested Himself in quite an ordinary human frame. Think about how often Homer describes his characters with the phrase "magnificent as a god." How weird would that phrase sound in the gospels? "Then Jesus, magnificent as a god, opened His mouth and taught them."

The divine glory of Jesus was hidden when He was not talking. Only in His words, in their dignity and divine power, could something of His true nature be discerned. He didn't look like a god, walk like a god, have everything his own way like a god, shine with uncreated glory like a god. And Moses too was not willing to trade on the glory that lingered on his face. His message was not "Admire me" but "Obey Yahweh."

B. Its Implications

There is doubtless more in the Exodus passage, but I want to pull out the rest of it by taking a look at 2 Corinthians 3, Paul's classic commentary on this passage and one of the most important texts in the New Testament. I've already mentioned Origen of Alexandria; for him, 2 Cor 3 was an absolutely paradigmatic text on the Christian ministry. I completely agree, by the way. The goal of ministry is to make people look like Jesus, and 2 Cor 3 describes how to do that: Show them His glory. When you pull away the veil and look at Jesus's glory, that glory transforms you into the image of God's Son, taking you from one degree of glory to the next. This is all done by Jesus through His Spirit. That's Paul's stunning verdict here. And that is my goal in every sermon. I want to show you the glory of Christ and take you to the next degree of glory.

But Paul not only uses this text to teach us how to become like Jesus; he draws a broader lesson about the Mosaic covenant.

1. The Mosaic Covenant Was Comparatively

In the 2 Cor 3 passage, the apostle compares the Mosaic Covenant to the ministry of the Spirit in what Scripture elsewhere calls the New Covenant or the church. As so frequently in the NT, the OT is described in a way that sounds really terrible. In order to understand the actual point, you must remember that the NT is speaking *comparatively* rather than *absolutely*. Let me, for instance, tell you that our GDP per capita here in the States — by every measure, the world's richest big country — is roughly \$60,000. Meanwhile, GDP per capita in India is about \$2000. If I were to say "Those people in India have nothing!" I would be speaking the truth, comparatively. To say that the amount I spend to live this year in the USA would last me for 30

years in India isn't quite true — but it indicates, comparatively speaking, how much more money is sloshing around here than around India.

Yet of course, Indians don't actually have nothing at all. They eat enough food, they sleep on comfortable beds, they go to work and come home to a house that doesn't leak — and all on one-thirtieth of the amount that we rich gringos are spending over here.

Anyway, Paul uses three harsh terms to describe the Mosaic Covenant here in 2 Cor 3. Keep in mind that he is explicitly speaking comparatively, not absolutely.

a) A Ministry of Death, 2 Cor. 3:7

Comparatively speaking, the Mosaic economy was a ministry of death. Why? Because the letter of the law kills, and the letter of the law was literally carved on stone by God for the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The law says “Do this and live” but, as law, has no power to give life. Thus, it kills; the law is not alive in the same way that the Holy Spirit is alive.

So when Paul calls Moses' ministry “the ministry of death,” he does not mean that no Israelites were spiritually alive. Clearly, among the wilderness generation we can list Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua. I recognize that four out of two million is really bad odds, and that may be part of Paul's point. But overall, his point is that in the Levitical system, the law is relatively more prominent than it is in the church, while the Holy Spirit is relatively less prominent. The Levitical system worked for salvation, but it did not work as well for salvation as the new covenant.

b) A Ministry of Condemnation, 2 Cor. 3:9

In keeping with his theme of the prominence of law and thus of condemnation, Paul dares to call the Mosaic ordinances “the ministry of condemnation.” The law contained no provision for deliberate sin — hence David's statement in Psalm 51, “You do not desire sacrifice, or I would give it.” The Mosaic ordinances condemned everyone who sinned deliberately. That is all of us. Yes, there was forgiveness available outside and beyond the Levitical channels, forgiveness abundantly witnessed by Psalm 51, by Isaiah 1, and many other passages. But the Levitical System as such was not equipped to deal with high-handed sins.

c) Inglorious, 2 Cor. 3:10

And thus, Paul called it “inglorious.” The glory that shone on Moses' face, the glory that dwelt on Sinai and came down into the tabernacle, is (comparatively speaking) inglorious. God was hiding the full measure of His majesty! That, of course, was already abundantly testified by the pillar of cloud and the thickness of the tabernacle curtains. Exodus does not pretend that God lived in a glass house and was visible to the Israelites all day long. But Paul dares to term the very real presence of God “inglorious” because of how little of the majesty and brightness of the Almighty it actually communicated.

That's how glorious the new covenant is, folks. Aaron and the Israelites were afraid to approach Moses, but when he said “Everything's OK; you can come closer” they came closer. The glory was intense, but it was endurable.

Not so, we can say, with the new covenant. The glory is far more intense — but also far more endurable, because God has concealed Himself this time not in a cloud or a tent but in a

man. The living flesh of Jesus Christ is the veil that conceals the fullness of God. That's glorious — more glorious than the shining face of Moses.

2. The Mosaic Covenant Was Absolutely

That said, I want to remind you yet again that in absolute terms, the Mosaic covenant was completely glorious.

a) Instituted by God, Ex. 34:32

It was instituted by God as a means for Him to dwell with His people.

b) A Provision of a Glorious Mediator, v. 29

And in the Mosaic covenant, the glory of God shone in the Mediator's face.

C. Its Meaning

But though Exodus does not comment on why Moses put on this veil, the apostle Paul does.

1. The Mosaic Covenant Would End, 2 Cor. 3:13

The reason that Moses wore the veil is this: He did not want the Israelites to know that the covenant administration he instituted was temporary. In fact, the OT repeatedly says "This is my covenant forever" when referring to the Sabbath. But the glory of the Levitical system was always intended to be temporary. It was passing away even on the day when God instituted it.

That's why Moses wore the veil — as a way of saying "The glory is temporary. It will be swallowed up by a far greater glory."

2. The Light of the Knowledge of the Glory of God Is Supremely Visible in the Face of Jesus Christ, 2 Cor. 4:6

What is that greater glory? It is the glory of God shining in Jesus' face. That glory swallows up the entire manifestation of the divine glory in the tabernacle.

God is light; the knowledge of God is light to the human mind; and the face of Jesus is the supreme place where we gain knowledge of what God is like. I'm not talking about artists' conceptions; I'm talking about the real deal, the face that God made for His Son, the face that looked on the generation of vipers and that said "Son, behold your mother."

How do you see that face? In the preaching of the word. That's how you can and must be transformed from one degree of glory to the next.

I don't need to put on a veil when I leave the pulpit. The glory of the New Covenant is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading. There is no need to hide that glory from you all. So behold it; take a long hard look at Jesus, and be transformed by His glory. Jacob saw God, and lived. Look at Jesus, and you too will live. Amen.