
Without His Presence

Exodus 33

Introduction A story of my father hunting without his trusted tracker, Bully.

Many of you are familiar with Tolkein's great trilogy, the Lord of the Rings. Some are familiar with the book that came before it and tells the story of Bilbo, the Hobbit. In that story, Bilbo and a band of hobbits are sent on a quest in which they destroyed a great dragon and brought home great treasures. They were accompanied by Gandalf the Grey, a powerful and wise man who shielded them and showed them the way. But in a key place as the band was entering the terrible forest of Mirkwood, Gandalf could not go on with them. He had other matters to attend to. This announcement dismayed the faithful band. "The dwarves groaned and looked most distressed, and Bilbo wept. They had begun to think Gandalf was going to come all the way and would always be there to help them out of difficulties.... They begged him not to leave them. They offered him dragon-gold and silver and jewels, but he would not change his mind."²⁷ As Phil Ryken (to whom I am indebted for this illustration) wrote, "When traveling through dangerous and unfamiliar territory, it is good to have a guide, and devastating to lose one." (Ryken, p.1018)

Israel has had the pillar of cloud and fire to guide them to this point. This is what God has promised them in Exodus 23:20-24, "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ***Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.*** "But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. "When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces." [ESV]

So here we are at the foot of Mt. Sinai. There on the path down near its base lay the shattered remains of the Tablets of the Law. The ground is burnt where the Golden Calf was destroyed. The people are going about with quiet sadness. Graves are being dug. Away, outside the camp, the faithful followers regroup. What now? What fearful thing will God do to disobedient people?

²⁷J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

Chastening: The Presence will not go with them (v.1-6)

Now that the covenant has been broken and God is not going to immediately destroy Israel, what will happen to them now?

Heart exposing command (v.1-3)

The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring 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, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Since God is going to keep His promise and bring them into the land, then it is time to go. They are to leave from Sinai and to head to the land. God will provide His angel to do with them and to lead the way into battle so that they can defeat the nations they will encounter.

But, the pillar of fire and cloud will not go with them. The visible presence of the glory of God will not leave. He is exiting from the Promise Land bound train. They will get what He promised their forefathers. But they will lose His presence with them.

Why is He not going to go? Because if He goes up with them, He will consume them. Because of their stubborn hearts set on sin and disobedience, God will end up destroying them. His not going with them is a mercy. And it is a test. Will they shrug their shoulders and simply say, "You know, we have our angel and we get our land and we will not be consumed. So, if God doesn't want to go or it is even better that He doesn't, then so be it." In other words, are they content to have God's promises and provisions, but without God Himself?

Repentance demonstrating actions (v.4-6)

⁴ When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, '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, that I may know what to do with you.'" ⁶ Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

Frankly, I am surprised. That God is not going with them is called a "disastrous word." They appear to be truly repentant. They want God's promises and provisions – but what is that if God's presence is not with them? So they mourn and they strip themselves of their ornaments. Why are these ornaments important? Because they are symbols of their Egyptian hearts. They were bedecked with Egyptian ornaments. Most of the records we have show that these ornaments would have been in the shape of or embossed with images of the Egyptian gods.

So God requires actions of them that will externally demonstrate their internal repentance. If they truly want God with them, then they have to strip off this jewelry even if it is an arbitrary command. So now the question is, "Will God go with them? Can He be persuaded to go?"

Communion: The Presence outside the tent (v.7-11)

Well, that is answered by filling in a gap with a bit of the past and a bit of the present. This may look like an interruption, but it is essential to flow. It tells us why the repentant people were devastated to find out that God's presence was not going to go up with them.

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and 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. ⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, 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 And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. ¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Where the people seek the Lord (v.7-8)

Evidently, before the Tabernacle was built, Moses had taken an ordinary tent and set it up outside of the camp. This was a temporary meeting place. It was here that people came to enquire of the Lord and probably also to meet with Moses and the elders. This was called the tent of meeting and would be replaced by the Tabernacle when it was built.

Where Moses meets the Lord (v.8)

One of the significant differences between the tent and the Tabernacle was that Moses entered the tent and the pillar of fire and cloud came to hover in front of the door of the tent. See the scene in your mind's eye. Moses would leave his own tent, striding out through the entrance to the camp. As he purposefully walked towards the tent, word would pass through the camp. Soon, everyone was standing in their own tent doorways, watching as Moses ducked into the tent of meeting.

Where the Lord speaks to Moses (v.9)

Why would they watch? Because when Moses entered the tent and turned to face the door, the glory pillar of God's presence would descend and hover in front of the door. This was an amazing scene on its own. But then, the astounding thing: God would talk to Moses out of the pillar. Verse 11 tells us that this was the kind of face-to-face conversation that friends had with friends. This was not just sovereign and subject; this was the intimate conversation between God and His friend, Moses.

Where the people worship the Lord (v.10)

It is no wonder then that the people would bow down in their tent doorways and worship. Here was their leader, mediator and intercessor in personal and public conversation with God. Moses was in the tent. God was hovering in the cloud before the tent. There, right there, was His presence. While God spoke with Moses, the people worshipped.

Where Joshua waits for the Lord**(v.11)**

Then, in an interesting sentence we get an insight into the heart of Moses' assistant, Joshua. Even when Moses would finish speaking and leave the tent, Joshua would not leave. He waited for the Lord. He lingered there. It is not too much to suppose that he longed for the Lord. He had gone up to the mountain with Moses, He had sat in the presence of the living God, seen Him in the flesh and ate and drank. Now, here, at the front of this tent was that very same presence. He lingered because he loved and longed for God.

This is what they were going to lose. They were going to not only lose the guiding nearness of the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night; they were going to lose the personal speaking between God and Moses. This is why they mourned. They are not content with just having what God promised and what God provided. They want His presence with them as well. They want His speaking to Moses. They want that continued intimacy of friendship between Moses and God. They want it in the hope that some day they might all have it.

Intercession: The Presence pleaded for**(v.12-17)**

So this is what they used to have. Now Moses recognizes what they will lose. He girds himself up once again to intercede with God.

¹² 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 favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ And 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 with me, do not bring us up from here." ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" ¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Personal plea for himself**(v.12-13)**

First is a personal plea for himself. He, Moses, is supposed to depart with this people and lead them to the Promised Land. But, God has not told him who is going to go with him in God's place. I think this is what Moses is getting at. It is a reference to Joshua. But notice, he says that God claims to know him and to have shown him favor. Yet, God is not going to go and has not given him a substitute.

Now listen to the boldness of his request. "If what you say is true that I have favor in your sight, then show me your ways that I may know you." Basically Moses is asking to know more about what God is doing and why He is doing it. He wants to understand "God's ways." He is almost certainly saying, "What I know about You, God, does not explain why You are not going up with Your people. It doesn't make sense. So, it must be that I don't know You as well as I thought nor as well as I should. So, show more about the way You are so that I will know and understand and not be baffled by this."

Why do I think this is point? Listen again to God's response.

God's gracious promise

(v.14)

And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." God's response is to assure Moses that He will go with him (the you here is singular). God is affirming that His presence will go with the man who believes in an obeying way. He will go with Moses. Just as He came and spoke to Moses as friend to friend *outside the camp* so He will go up with Moses.

And God will give Moses rest. Here is the first indication that the ultimate fulfillment of entering the Promised Land is not a physical place but a spiritual state. Moses and the people want God's presence and to enter into the land. God promises Moses that He will go with Moses and give him rest. Hebrews reminds us that Joshua did not give the people their final rest when he conquered the land. Entering the Sabbath rest from salvation by works is the ultimate fulfillment of the Promised Land.

Now, does Moses understand this? Probably not. He primarily hears that he will have God's Presence with him and that his soul no longer needs to be in turmoil. He may have a glimpse of the Promised Land as the eventual rest. But this is the rest his soul has by believing what God promises and provides in His sovereign plan and purpose.

Earnest plea for the people

(v.15-16)

Ah, what an intercessor Moses is. In these wonderful sentences he accepts and rejoices in God's presence with him while extending the going up and the need to God's people. Notice how he identifies with God's people. Further, notice how he distinguishes himself and God's people. They are different from all the nations around them *because of the presence of God*. Lot's of nations are strong, large, victorious and have visible, but idolatrous gods. But no nation, no people group have the LORD God, Yahweh, visibly present with them in the pillar of cloud and fire. If God does not go up with the nation then they lose their identity and God His reputation.

God's gracious provision

(v.17)

Don't you think God smiles on such audacity? Verse 17 is God's gracious provision. The very thing Moses asks for, God will do. He will do it, not because of anything He sees in the nation of Israel, but because of Moses. Here is the phrase that points to grace in the Old Testament, "found favor in God's sight." This does not mean that Moses finally measured up but rather that God acted in His grace towards Moses. So this provision is an act of God's grace.

He also provides because He knows Moses by name. What an interesting phrase this is. Moses is the friend of God. God speaks to Moses as with a friend. God is willing to go with Moses up to the Promised Land even when he will not go with the people. Now, God will grant Moses' request because He knows Him by his name. You see, Moses had put God's name and reputation on the line for the sake of His people. Now God, with a lovely turn, says that He graciously responds to Moses because Moses has put his own name and reputation on the line.

Here is the challenge to God's people: are we willing to put our names on the line for the sake of God's reputation?

Passion: The Glory hungered for**(v.18-23)**

Why will people do this? Why would Moses stake his name and reputation to God's? Here it is in verse 18.

¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my 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 man shall not see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD said, "Behold, 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.

In his request**(v.18)**

What a simple and stunning request. "Show me your glory."

This reflects Moses' heart to see God and understand God. I do not believe that Moses is seeking a mystical, direct experience of God. He would be content to see the bright shining transcendence of God.

This reflects Moses' place in redemptive history. He has seen the pillar of fire and cloud. He has seen the unbelievably powerful works of God in the destructive miracles in Egypt. He has drunk the water from the rock and has eaten manna which dewed the wilderness floor. He has even sat at the feet of God, looked upon Him, lived and eaten in His presence. He has spoken to God, face to face. But He is longing for more.

This is often the way we express it: we want to see God. We know deep in our souls that we cannot *see* God directly. Nevertheless, it is often an expression of the longing of spiritual souls. Job expressed it this way, "Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" [Job 19:23-27]

David expressed it as well in these words from Psalm 17:15, "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness." [ESV] All of these are the holy desires of humble people. But note that their expectations are set beyond the death line. When they awake in righteousness, they can and will see God's face.

In God's response**(v.19-23)**

In God's response we find this is what Moses longed for – he wanted to see the face of God. But he cannot do that. It is not yet time. But what God will do is to make all of His goodness to pass before Moses. He will announce His Name, the LORD. He will hide Moses in a crevasse in the rocks. He will cover Moses while He passes by. And Moses will not see God's face nor His glory directly. He will see that which remains when God's Presence sweeps by. As one has put it, "We might think of what Moses saw as the contrails of God's glory, the luminous clouds that trailed from His divine being." (Ryken, p.1035)

What Moses' longed for God has done. He has sent His glory in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the outshining of the Father's glory and the exact representation of His person and character. He walked among us and we beheld His glory full of grace and truth.

Conclusion Listen to the glorious privilege we now have as part of the New Covenant people. We are not hid in the cleft of the rock to see contrails of God's glory. Here is what the Apostle Paul declares to us because of Christ.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. [2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV]

I want to close with these words from the Apostle John. In this context, they are ever more stunning.

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. ²This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. ³We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.

⁵This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. ⁶So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. ⁷But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.

⁸If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. ⁹But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. [1 John 1:1-2:1, NLT]

The one through whose face the glory of God shines is the one who pleads our cause because of our sins. His fellowship is with us if we are dwelling in the light. Yet when we sin and that fellowship is broken, we have the responsibility to confess them and forsake them. May God grant us repenting grace. May God grant us grace to pursue Him above all things. May we long to see Him in the face of Christ.

