

Exodus 34:29-35

Introduction

Four weeks ago, we came to the final, glorious conclusion of the whole golden calf episode. In spite of Israel's rebellion, God will still dwell with them and among them. We know, now, that this is nothing to be taken for granted. And so, as the ultimate sign and assurance of this promise, God made all His glorious goodness to pass before Moses. The evil and wickedness of the golden calf is followed by a display of God's glory that was unparalleled by anything ever seen before – a miracle of God's mercy. And so the covenant that was broken has now been remade. The people that were cast off have now been taken again to be God's very own.

And yet, even though the golden calf episode itself has come to its conclusion, it's still part of a much bigger story, and the implications of the golden calf for the future of God's people are massive. In our text this morning, we'll begin to see just *how* massive they are.

I. Exodus 34:29 — When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

This is the second time, now, that Moses has come down from the mountain. Back in chapter 32 we read, in almost identical wording:

➤ Exodus 32:15 — Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand...

Of course, in that case, when Moses came down he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. In that case, he came down only to announce a **broken** covenant. In this case, Moses comes down *with two brand new tablets of the testimony in his hand*, announcing that the broken covenant has been fully **remade**. In chapter 32, Moses came down with the worst possible news that the people could ever expect to hear. Now, in chapter 34, Moses comes down with the best possible news that God's people could have ever hoped to hear.

The God who has just now caused **all** His glorious **goodness** to pass before Moses, the God who is free to be merciful to whom He will be merciful and to be gracious to whom He will be gracious has chosen to be merciful and gracious to Israel by renewing and remaking the covenant that was broken! And it's in keeping with *this good* news, and *this* unprecedented vision of God's glory that Moses has just seen on the mountain, it's in keeping with these things that the skin of Moses' face is now shining. The last time Moses' came down from the mountain, the only change in Moses' face was that it betrayed a man who was burning with anger. (32:19-20) This time, Moses' face betrays a man who has just seen God as no one has ever seen Him before. He's just seen all the glorious goodness of a merciful and gracious God pass before Him on the mountain, and now the very skin of his own face "shines" as it were with the reflection of *that* glory – the glory of the God who takes Israel *again* to be His covenant people. Only Moses was with God there on the mountain. Only Moses saw the glory of God pass before Him. But now, in

the shining skin of Moses' face, and the message that he brings, the people can *also* see, as it were, that same glory reflected to them.

What does the shining skin of Moses' face *mean*? On the one hand, it's a sign of God's mercy and grace in remaking the covenant and taking the people again to be His covenant people. I think of the passage in Numbers six:

- Numbers 6:24–26 — The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

After all that's happened with the golden calf, the shining face of Moses is really, really, really, *really* good news. On the other hand, the shining face of Moses is also a pointer to the continuing requirements of the covenant that the people have just broken – the requirements that are all summed up in the Ten Commandments newly written on the two tablets of the testimony; the requirements that are all holy and righteous and good. (cf. Rom. 7:12) To sum up, the glory reflected on Moses' face is the glory of *God*; but, not just of “God”—it's the glory of God *as* their *covenant* Lord – *Yahweh*. It's the glory of God revealed in His covenant that He graciously makes with His people. Can you see, now, how this glory—this shining face of Moses—is such a wonderful, and beautiful, and *good* thing? Only, then we go on to read in verse 30:

II. Exodus 34:30 — Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

If the shining face of Moses is such a good thing, and the *sign* of such good things, then why are the people *afraid*? Why won't they come near to Moses? What's their problem? Once again, the language in this verse reminds us of something else that happened previously. Back in Exodus 20, after the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments to all the people:

- Exodus 20:18 — Now when **all the people saw** the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, **the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off...**

There *is* a godly fear and a holy trembling that should always characterize any kind of encounter with the one true and living God. Not only are we sinful, while God is holy, but we are finite creatures, while God is the infinite Creator. So, whenever we read God's word or hear it preached to us, there should be a fear and trembling. Whenever we come into God's presence to pray or to worship, there should be a holy fear and trembling. But in the end, it is *not* God's desire that we should be overcome by a terror and paranoia that makes us want to run from Him and hide. We *must* learn, and know, the difference between the fear and trembling that actually *casts out* terror and produces peace, and the fear and trembling that makes us want to run and hide. This is what explains Moses' response to the people when they were afraid and trembled, and stood far off:

- Exodus 20:20 — Moses said to the people, “**Do not fear** [do not live in terrified paranoia], for God has come to test you, **that the [right and good] fear of him may be before you**, that you may not sin.”

So how are the people to fear, and yet not fear? How are the people to fear with the good fear that *casts out* all the bad fear? Remember what the people said to Moses when they were afraid, and trembled, and stood far off:

- Deuteronomy 5:28, 30–31 (cf. Exod. 20:20) — [The people said to Moses,] “Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.” ... And the LORD said to me, “I have heard the words of this people... They are right in all that they have spoken... Go and say to them, ‘Return to your tents.’ But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them.”

So the solution to the problem of the people’s “terror” in the presence of the glory of God is that Moses will speak *for God to the people* as the *mediator* of the covenant. The solution to the people running away and standing “far off” is that Moses will stand *in between*, and speak to them for God, with the very words of God. Now, the people can be freed from their terror even while still fearing the Lord with trembling.

It’s against this backdrop, and with all this in mind, that we have to try to understand what we’re reading this morning. This time, it’s not the “thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking” that the people see! This time, it’s the shining face—*of their own Moses*(!!!)—of the *covenant mediator*(!!!)—the one who speaks to them for God so they won’t be overcome with the terror that runs and hides. And *yet* we read: “Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone... **and they were afraid to come near him.**”

It would seem that something isn’t right, here. But *maybe* not. After all the people weren’t on the mountain with Moses. They weren’t there to hear what the Lord said to him. The people *have* just experienced the wrath of God because of their sin. Maybe, at least initially, we can understand their fright. So we go on to read in verses 31–32:

III. Exodus 34:31–32 — But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai.

It’s easy to imagine the scene. As Moses comes down the mountain and into the camp with the skin of his face shining, the people are all backing away, if not flat out running away. Moses calls out to the people and they all stop running, but only Aaron and the leaders of the congregation return to Moses. Then Moses talked with them. No doubt, Moses tells them about the vision of God’s glory and goodness that he’s seen on the mountain. No doubt, Moses tells them the good news that the covenant has been remade and God will take them again to be His covenant people. No doubt, Moses tells them about the God who is free to be merciful to whom He will be merciful and gracious to whom He will be gracious. And, so, then we can imagine

that Aaron and the leaders of the congregation all return to the people who are still standing far off and relay to the people all that Moses has just said. “There’s no need for running and hiding. The shining face of Moses is just the sign of the glory of the covenant and of our covenant Lord who is taking us again to be His covenant people!” “*Afterward* all the people of Israel *came near*, and [Moses] commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai.”

So, no more running now, right? No more hiding? *Now* the people can bask in the Lord’s *glory* reflected, *for the very first time*, on the face of Moses, the mediator of God’s covenant. Isn’t this a joyous and a wondrous thing? Isn’t the shining face of Moses such a beautiful sign of God’s goodness, and mercy, and grace? But if so, then how are we to understand what happens next?

IV. Exodus 34:33 — And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Why? Why should the glory of the covenant, reflected on Moses’ face, be covered up? Why should the glory of Israel’s *covenant Lord* “only” *reflected* on the face of their very own *covenant mediator* be hidden behind a veil!?

The problem, here, isn’t that the radiance of Moses’ face was physically too bright to behold. (cf. 34:29, 35) The problem is, apparently, that the people are simply still *afraid* of *any* manifestation or display of the glory of God. Apparently, the people still feel the need to hide. What the people see in the shining face of Moses is only threat and danger. Don’t you just want to take hold of them, and shake them hard, and tell them to wake up? But, apparently, it wouldn’t have done any good. We go on to read in verses 34-35:

V. Exodus 34:34–35 — *Whenever* Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would [always] remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face was shining. And Moses would [always] put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Conclusion

Why? If what the people are really seeing in the radiance of Moses’ face is the glory of God’s *covenant with them*, then why in the world aren’t they *loving* that glory and basking in it? Why can’t they see in the shining face of Moses the reflected glory of God’s goodness, and mercy, and grace? Why are they still afraid?

It’s because their hearts are still hard, and their eyes are still blind. Here’s the key: It’s because they actually think that this law-based covenant is God’s **final**, word to them – His **permanent** and **ultimate** word. But if anyone should have known better, it was the Israelites. They were the ones who had *just now* broken the covenant. If they couldn’t see it before, they should be able to see now that even when God remakes the covenant, this covenant word that He speaks *cannot* be His last, and ultimate word to them – not if the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are to be fulfilled. It’s obvious to anyone with eyes! They should have seen that even at the moment the covenant was remade, it already contained *within itself* the seed of its own extinction. But they

didn't see because their hearts were hardened, and their eyes were blinded. They couldn't see that the *true glory* of the covenant—the glory reflected to them now on Moses' face—was its proclamation to them of a future day when the grace of God revealed in the “old covenant” would be **fulfilled** and **replaced** by the infinitely more glorious display of that same grace in *something* new—something better. And whatever that something new and something better would be, *that* would be God's last and final and ultimate word to His people. The **true glory** of the covenant at Mount Sinai was, ironically, only to be seen in that it was temporary – in that it actually contained within itself the seed of its own **abolishment**—and so also, by default, and from day one, its true glory was that it pointed to the coming of something better. But because of Israel's sin and hardened hearts, they were blinded to *this glory*.

Because the people of Israel could only see in the covenant God's *final* word, they **had** to believe that they could somehow be justified and forgiven based on their keeping of the covenant law. *Even though* the covenant itself contradicted this. *Even though* their own recent experience with the golden calf contradicted this. *Even though* the unconditional promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob contradicted this. And *even though* the Lord of the covenant Himself contradicted this when He caused all **His goodness** to pass before Moses, and when He said to him: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” (33:19) It was obvious all along. The **true** glory of the covenant is in the grace and mercy that it reveals and for which it prepares the way. The **true** glory of the covenant is in the grace and mercy which it reveals, and which will one day bring about its own end.

Can *you see*? Because the Israelites couldn't. We know from our passage this morning that while they were willing to listen to the word that Moses received from God, they still needed the shining face of Moses to be veiled. In other words, they were willing to hear the commands of the covenant, but not able to **perceive** the **true glory** of the covenant. And so, because of their hardened, sinful hearts, the shining face of Moses could only be, for them, something **fearful** and terrifying.

Hardened hearts and blinded eyes are a terrible, *terrible* thing. And what makes them especially terrible is that those with blinded eyes are very often those who are absolutely convinced they can see. (cf. John 9:39-41) The glory that Israel saw reflected on Moses' face was the glory of the covenant. It was the glory of the covenant King revealed in all His goodness, and mercy and grace. But Israel was blinded to that glory, and so the veil over Moses' face would forever be a sign of the veil over their own hearts. The veil over Moses' face would forever be a sign of their inability to see—to perceive—the **true glory** of the covenant that God has just graciously and mercifully *remade* with them. Because of this blindness, the covenant that should have brought life to them as it pointed forward to its own abolishment and replacement, brought death and condemnation instead. Why does Moses veil his shining face? Only because the hard hearts of the people **demand**ed it — and so, also, because the hard hearts of the people **deserv**ed it.

Don't you just want to reach out and grab that veil and shred it to pieces? Don't you just want to take hold of the people, and shake them hard, and tell them to wake up? Doesn't it make your heart groan to see the veil over Moses' shining face? But then the question that all this so clearly raises is this: Do we live with a veil over our own eyes? Or have we come to see with **unveiled** eyes the **true glory** of the covenant at Mount Sinai? Think about this:

- 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 — If the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came *with such glory* that the [hardened] Israelites were not [even] able to gaze at Moses' face *because of its glory, a glory* which was already [in principle] being abolished, will not the ministry of the Spirit [the ministry of righteousness and life] have *even more glory*? For *if there was glory* in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must *far exceed it in glory*. Indeed, in this case, *what once had glory* has come to have *no glory at all*, because of *the glory that surpasses it*. For if what was being abolished came *with glory*, much more will what is permanent have glory.

If the hardened Israelites weren't even able to gaze at the glory of the Old Covenant reflected on the shining face of Moses, how much *less*(!!!) will they be able to perceive the far, *far* greater glory of the New Covenant reflected in the face of Jesus Christ? And yet, it's only when we turn to Christ that the veil finally comes off – the veil is taken away from our eyes – and we *see, finally*, what we were never able to see before. To see the glory of the New Covenant in the face of Jesus Christ *is to see* the *true glory* of the Old Covenant that was reflected on the face of Moses – only now in infinitely greater detail, in infinitely more exquisite beauty, with a revelation of glory and of grace infinitely brighter and more radiant than ever before. So listen to the Apostle John:

- John 1:14–18 — The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and **we have seen his glory**, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness **we have all** received, **grace in place of grace**. For the law [the first manifestation of God's glory and grace] was given through Moses; grace and truth [the final and ultimate manifestation of God's glory and grace] came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

What *we* see in the face of Jesus Christ by faith is a glory infinitely greater than even what the Israelites saw reflected on the face of Moses. *More than that*(!), what we see in the face of Jesus Christ by faith is a glory even infinitely greater than what *Moses himself* saw when he was with the Lord on the mountain.

Has the veil truly been taken off your eyes? Are you seeing even now, with unveiled eyes, the true glory of the Lord? Because if you are, and if I am, then it's literally impossible to remain unaffected and unchanged.

When Moses came down from the mountain after seeing the covenant glory of God, his own face was shining with the glory that he had been exposed to. How much *more*, then, when *we* are beholding the infinitely greater revelation of God's glory in the face of our New Covenant mediator—Jesus Christ, will we necessarily reflect that *greater* glory to all around us? It's this awesome reality of a people all beholding the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ that gave Paul such confidence and such boldness as a minister of the New Covenant. It's what gives *me* confidence in the ministry that God has given to me. In fact, this reality gave Paul so much boldness that he even dared to compare himself and the other apostles to Moses!

- 2 Corinthians 3:12–16a — Since we [apostles] have such a hope [the assurance of the effectiveness and permanency of the New Covenant and of the Spirit which brings life], we are very bold [toward you, the people of the new covenant], not like Moses [with the old covenant people of Israel], who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the end [the goal and true glory] of what was being abolished [the law covenant]. But *their* minds were hardened. For to this day, when *they* read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. *But* [this is not so with you!]

And so now, after comparing himself and the rest of the apostles to Moses, Paul is even *more* bold and dares to compare each and every single one of us who have believed in Jesus with Moses.

- 2 Corinthians 3:16–18 — When *anyone* turns to the Lord, the veil is removed [just like Moses when he would go in before the Lord and remove the veil from his face and behold his glory]. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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 [just *like* Moses, only *better* and far *more glorious*]. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

And so, as one person says, under the New Covenant “every Christian has become a Moses,” – only *we* are beholding a glory even greater than anything that Moses ever saw. (Hering; quoted in Martin) Do you *believe* this? This is *why* “all who know Christ as Savior... *reflect* his glory even more wonderfully than Moses did... by reason of living the transforming life of the Spirit.” (Stuart) The longer we live, and the longer we gaze at God’s glory in the face of Christ and the message of the Gospel, the more thorough and complete is our transformation into that same image “from one degree of glory to another.” It’s a gradual process of lifelong **change** until the day that we gaze on Jesus’ face and perceive His true glory even with our physical eyes. (cf. Gal. 4:19) *That’s* when our transformation will be complete, and *we* will all shine like the sun in the kingdom of our father – bearing His image and perfectly **reflecting** His likeness. (Mat. 13:43; cf. Dan. 12:3; 1 Cor. 15:44-49) The Apostle John writes:

- 1 John 3:2–3 — Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him [gazing and looking intently upon Him even now, by faith] purifies himself as he is pure.

Brothers and sisters, we were all blind, but now we see. The veil has been taken away from our eyes and hearts, and *we all*, with unveiled faces, are beholding the glory of the Lord, and being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another. That’s the indicative – the *reality* of the way things *are*. But in the Bible, the indicative is always the **grounds** for the subjunctive and the imperative (the exhortation and the command). **Let us, therefore**, look **intently** upon the face of Christ through faith, and **let us, therefore**, more and more and more reflect His likeness and glory in all of our thinking, in all of our speaking, in all of our acting – in all that we are.

- 2 Corinthians 4:3–4, 6 (cf. Mat. 17:1-6; Rev. 1:16) — Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... [But] God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.