

Study 1 — Show me your glory! (Exodus 32—34)

Our emphasis will be on the desire of Moses to see God's glory (33:18). He recognises the shallowness of idolatry and wants God! The passage also introduces us to major themes that will recur through the series so it will be important to see the panorama and to flag a return to other matters.

1. Moses wants to see God's glory and his request is granted (33:17-18). He knows that the identity and mission of Israel relies wholly on God being present to them and gracious to them. Actually, he is asking for God to be present and gracious to him in particular so that he can lead this people to their inheritance (33:12-16). Our habit is to hide from God when shamed, but it is to him that we should and may come.

2. At this point, Moses and Israel have already seen remarkable revelations of God's power and favour. They know the story of Abraham to whom the God of glory appeared (Acts 7:2), and it is this God who appears to Moses in a burning bush (3:6 with Ac. 7:2). They have witnessed the plagues in Egypt (cf. Rev. 15:8), the cloud that led them (16:10), and, in the face of their grumbling, a revelation of glory in the provision of manna (16:7). Note that the reason for God working this daily miracle for them is that they may know it is he who had saved them from Egypt. The daily providence is a sign of the great redemption, and, we could add, the great redemption is the assurance of the daily providences (Rom. 8:32). Then, Israel sees the fire and hears God's voice on Sinai (24:16). What more could Moses wish to see?

3. In the midst of these revelations of glory, the people of Israel are shamed—or derided by their enemies (32:25) and, of course, bring shame on God. Nothing will meet this trouble apart from a further revelation of God's glory. Who is God when we are who we are? This is what we need to know. Israel is acting shamefully but they think they are happy and doing something honourable. God's victory over Egypt was public knowledge, and now he is being shamed by Israel's dishonouring him. We are the image of God. To interpose an idol, to give worth to the creation we are intended to manage, is to oppose God. Giving value to idols shames both God, and us.

4. Shame goes to the depths of who we are. It has become our default position, though God has taken measures to save us from this (Gen. 3:21; Rev. 3:18). Note the desperate measures used in Eden to avoid shame. Note the desperate measures these idolators at Sinai take to sustain their false worship, and the harsh measures needed to repress these—the law tablets are smashed (32:19), the calf is ground up and drunk (32:20), and rebels are slaughtered (32:26-29).

5. Moses is the mediator of the covenant God is making with Israel and he recognises that atonement must be made (32:31-33). God's glory is not a thing to assume, nor is it easily revealed. But Moses wants no future that does not include the people whom God has promised to save. We may say that his love for Israel is stunning, but it would be more accurate to say that he has apprehended the glory of the love of God for Israel (Deut. 7:6-10). In fact, God says he will do whatever is to be done; he will not pass over sin. This is not a task for Moses. We cannot negotiate our way into knowing God's glory. Moses can lead the people into their inheritance, but without God!

6. There is no tent of meeting at this stage and Moses has set up God's tent outside the camp, perhaps because of the Lord's relationship to his people is still ambiguous.

Here God speaks with his prophet face to face (33:9-11; Num. 12:8) and the people must look from a distance to see what the Lord will say.

7. Moses must have the presence of God, and he must see (and be exposed to) God's glory (33:12-16). There is nothing else that make God's people what they are. Without this, there will be no witness to what real humanity is. God consents to his request. As Jesus explains: 'Ask, and you will receive' (Luke 11:9-10). Whatever Moses sees, the glory is proclaimed as steadfast love and faithfulness but without overlooking sin. This declaration becomes, not just the fire or light that led Israel through the wilderness but the moral glory under which they live for the rest of their history.

8. Moses has greatness as a mediator, but his is a fading glory, making room for Christ (34:29-35 with 2 Cor. 3). In him, the glory of God is revealed in flesh, as grace and truth (John 1:14). Shame is with us every day, as is the temptation to live with a false glory, but we should run to God, not from him. We should ask to see the revelation of his glory, especially at those times when we have come to shame. Christ is the light, and life, of the world, the Mediator of the covenant, and makes atonement so that we may live in and reflect the glory.