

Sermon 113, A God to Go Before Us, Exodus 33:18-34:9

Proposition: Our craving for a visible God is expressed and addressed in God's display of His glory to Moses.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, recall with me the original motivation for the golden calf: "Make us gods to go before us," said Israel to Aaron. And he did. But that was no god, not worth worshiping, incapable of leading. Nonetheless, it well expressed the human desire for a visible god. We want to see what we worship! It is astonishing what an outsized role the sense of sight plays in our lives. That is true also in the religious sphere. But I want you to see with me that God addresses that felt need in an absolutely glorious, God-sized display of His glory before Moses. The people had asked for a visible God to go before them; now, in the opening verse of our text, Moses requests the same thing. To be known by God is much. To find grace in the sight of God is much. But to see the glory of God — that is more. That is what we

were made for. The craving for a god we can see is expressed in Moses' request to see God's glory — and it is addressed by God's willingness to show His goodness and His back to Moses. Show us the Father, and it is enough for us! That is exactly what happened here, as the Father showed Himself to Moses, and it was enough — not just for Moses, but for all of us as we absorb the glory of the holy one as conveyed to us through the Mediator's account of his vision of God.

I. Moses Asks to See God's Glory, 33:18

Brothers and sisters, this is obviously a high point in the biblical record. There are several climaxes in the book of Exodus, places where the knowledge of God takes a major step forward. The first climax comes at the burning bush, where Yahweh reveals Himself as the self-feeding fire. Another climax arrives with the tenth plague, the Passover and the Red Sea crossing. The Ten Commandments are a high point, and God's proclamation of His name a still higher one. The final climax comes right at the end, as the tabernacle is erected — but it is a frustrated climax, for the Almighty refuses to enter the tabernacle without proper preparation, which will be described in the first chapters of Leviticus.

In terms of the high points, this is at least the equal of the Passover and Red Sea; as a moment of revelation to the eye, it is virtually unsurpassed until Isaiah sees Yahweh enthroned in the temple. Moses has the same desire as the people for a visible God to go before them. But he goes about satisfying this desire the right way, by asking for a sight of the uncreated glory of the LORD. He had already seen the self-feeding fire. He had already seen the pillar of cloud and fire. He had talked with the Lord face to face, seen the pavement under His feet, and eaten in His presence. But now He wants to take it to the next level and see God.

II. God Briefs Moses on the Beatific Vision, 33:19-34:4

God responds positively! Rather than saying "This didn't work out so well with the golden calf," or "Aren't the cloud and fire enough for you?" He says "I will make all my goodness pass before you." God is going to show Moses all His goodness. He has revealed Himself primarily to the ear — but now He will display Himself to Moses' eyes. That said, the Almighty goes on to deliver three additional speeches briefing Moses on how to prepare for the beatific vision for a total of four speeches before the climactic fifth speech in which He proclaims His name. Let's look at each of these four speeches.

A. God's Promise, v. 19

The first speech is God's promise, where He describes three things that He will visibly do for Moses.

1. Making All His Goodness Pass by before Moses

The Vulgate translation says that God will make "all goodness" pass before Moses, and that is pretty close to true. God will show His goodness in a visible manner. We don't know what that entailed. But we know that it was spectacular. Some theologians have looked to this text to draw a distinction between God's essence and energies, as if the goodness is not quite the same thing as God Himself. I don't think that's a good way of understanding it. God is His goodness, and when His goodness passes before Moses He is showing Moses Himself. Certainly if you had to

look for a single attribute that summed up God, you could do a lot worse than goodness: “Yahweh is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble.”

2. Proclaiming Yahweh’s Name

But not only does He promise to show His goodness to Moses. He also promises to proclaim His name, Yahweh.

The name has been important in this book. “What is your name?” Moses asks at the burning bush. Then at Sinai He’s given the tablets that say “Do not take the name of Yahweh in vain.” Shortly before that, God promised to send an angel in whom is His name. And now, God has just consented to accompany Israel because He knows Moses by name. Thus, to hear that God will proclaim His name is a powerful and wonderful statement. Who is the one who dwelt in the bush, who plagued Egypt, who delivered His people? He is Yahweh. What does that mean? He is going to explain it. We will look next week in detail at what God announced about His name.

3. Showing Mercy Even to Moses and Israel

But what He announces here, on the heels of promising to proclaim His name, is shocking. It is the truth of election. We so often see this truth in negative terms, as though election were about God not saving. But the whole context of this statement indicates that election is about God saving! He will be gracious to whom He will be gracious, and that means even to Moses, even to Israel, even to you! Without God’s sovereign free choice to be gracious and show compassion, none of us has a chance. Believe me, there is nothing in the human race to compel a perfect being to love us. But He chooses to love us anyway.

B. God’s Peril: You Cannot See His Face and Live, v. 20

But though God promises to show His goodness, His name, and His grace visibly to Moses, there is a caveat expressed in this second speech. Though you can see God, you cannot see Him fully. No man can see His face.

Now, we know that this is not an ultimate or final statement, for we are also told that we shall see His face. Theologians have debated for centuries whether the beatific vision is the face of the Father or only of the Son, whether to see the human face of Jesus is all we will ever be capable of or whether, in a certain sense, we will also see the divine face of God. We simply do not yet know. But we do know that we will see Him as He is. But now we don’t and can’t. Two authors have meditated on this statement. I want to read you Herman Melville’s statement, ostensibly about the sperm whale:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face.¹

¹ *Moby-Dick*, ch. 86, “The Tail” at [The Project Gutenberg eBook of Moby Dick; Or the Whale, by Herman Melville](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2/2-10/2-10-h/2-10-h.htm)

Hear also G.K. Chesterton's commentary on this passage from *The Man Who Was Thursday*:

"When I first saw Sunday," said Syme slowly, "I only saw his back; and when I saw his back, I knew he was the worst man in the world. His neck and shoulders were brutal, like those of some apish god. His head had a stoop that was hardly human, like the stoop of an ox. In fact, I had at once the revolting fancy that this was not a man at all, but a beast dressed up in men's clothes."

"Get on," said Dr. Bull.

"And then the queer thing happened. I had seen his back from the street, as he sat in the balcony. Then I entered the hotel, and coming round the other side of him, saw his face in the sunlight. His face frightened me, as it did everyone; but not because it was brutal, not because it was evil. On the contrary, it frightened me because it was so beautiful, because it was so good."

"Syme," exclaimed the Secretary, "are you ill?"

"It was like the face of some ancient archangel, judging justly after heroic wars. There was laughter in the eyes, and in the mouth honour and sorrow. There was the same white hair, the same great, grey-clad shoulders that I had seen from behind. But when I saw him from behind I was certain he was an animal, and when I saw him in front I knew he was a god."

"Pan," said the Professor dreamily, "was a god and an animal."

"Then, and again and always," went on Syme like a man talking to himself, "that has been for me the mystery of Sunday, and it is also the mystery of the world. When I see the horrible back, I am sure the noble face is but a mask. When I see the face but for an instant, I know the back is only a jest. Bad is so bad, that we cannot but think good an accident; good is so good, that we feel certain that evil could be explained."²

In short, brothers and sisters, there is a great deal here in this contrast between the back and the face. Allow me to state the obvious: It is a metaphor taken from our physically embodied social interactions. We all know the difference between a back and a face. But when we attempt to relate this obvious physical reality to the spiritual, disembodied reality of Yahweh our God, the mind reels. We don't know how to put the two together. Suffice it to say that Sunday, and the sperm whale, both are extended literary illustrations of the Lord's warning to Moses about seeing His face.

C. God's Provision, vv. 20-23

In a third speech, the Lord describes how the vision is going to physically work.

1. A Place by Him

First of all, Moses is going to be located near Yahweh. "There is a place by me," says the Almighty.

² *The Man Who Was Thursday*, ch. 15, "The Accuser" at [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Man Who Was Thursday, by G. K. Chesterton](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10000/10000-h/10000-h.htm)

2. A Rock

He will stand on a rock. Is the rock Christ?

3. A Cleft

Better, he will be hidden inside the rock, like an old West gunman crouching behind cover. But the thing to fear here is not guns, but glory. God's overwhelming rushing energy will consume the one who comes too close as the fire killed the men who threw Shadrach & co. into the furnace.

4. A Hand

In addition to the protection offered by the rock, God offers protection with His hand. He will place Moses into the cleft; He will cover him with His hand. Doesn't the hand of God radiate the same glory? Brothers and sisters, the only thing that can protect you from the glory of God is the . . . glory of God. As superhero movies have shown us, beskar vs. lightsaber or vibranium vs. vibranium becomes a very pedestrian kind of contest — one indistinguishable from steel vs. steel in more terrestrial duels.

Only God can preserve you from the power and wrath of God. Only God can shield you from His glory. Lead, concrete, and dirt won't work. The hills and mountains will not hide you from the wrath of the Lamb, no matter how deeply underneath them you tunnel. To keep up the sci-fi metaphors, imagine a terrified resident of Alderaan tunneling deep beneath the surface, five miles down, to try to hide from the Death Star's superlaser.

Exactly.

The glory of God is a consuming fire, and only God Himself can protect you from it.

5. A Back

The back reveals less of the person than the face does. How much less? I can't quantify that and neither can you. But we understand the metaphor. God is going to reveal something of Himself — a lot of Himself, actually, to Moses.

D. God's Instructions, 34:1-3

The fourth speech details God's further instructions for seeing Him, this time relating to the practical preparations Moses needs to make.

1. Cut New Tablets for Covenant Renewal

He has to cut two new stone tablets so that God can write the Ten Commandments again for Israel. In the most graphic way, the Almighty is illustrating the restoration of the broken covenant. The stone tablets were shattered, but new ones have been made. The covenant law was broken by God's people, but God is writing it down again for them to know Him and walk in His covenant.

2. Come to Me on the Mountaintop

God also sets the meeting place and time: the top of Sinai, in the morning. God likes to get stuff done early. Typically major covenant events begin early in the morning.

3. Keep the People and their Animals Away

Finally, God wants Moses to keep the people and their animals away. Again, the mountain is holy because it is touching God. The glory of God is going to be visible on the mountain. It's not a sight for man or beast; they will be consumed.

This is a pretty astonishing briefing. God has a lot to say to Moses, and it is stuff beyond mortal ken. Isn't that what we would expect from a God who is beyond all mortal reckoning?

III. Moses Obeys, v. 4

So Moses obeys. He cuts the tablets, gets up early, and is at the meeting place at the time agreed. Can you imagine how his heart must have pounded? He was about to see something that no one had seen since the Garden of Eden. God was coming. Brothers and sisters, do you have that same feeling of anticipation for hearing the word of God on Sunday morning here in the church? You will see Jesus Christ portrayed before your eyes as crucified. Does that thrill you?

But of course, the text does not tell us "And Moses was thrilled." The main application here is not to be thrilled with the presence of God, though that is true. The main application is that the Mediator sees God for us, and tells us what God is like. You don't have the beatific vision, but Jesus does.

IV. God Shows His Glory and Proclaims His Name, vv. 5-8

This is it; this is the climactic moment. Once again, as with the banquet in ch. 24, the narrator makes no attempt to describe what God looked like. That will have to wait until the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel, and John.

A. God Comes Down in the Cloud, v. 5a

But we do know that God came down in the cloud. Was this the "same" pillar of cloud that had accompanied them, or a different one? The question is most likely immaterial. God wraps Himself in cloud to hide His fire. The cloud conceals His glory, but its presence reminds the viewer that God is there. And indeed, God came down. He came down to Earth from Heaven, who was God and Lord of all. Moses did not ascend to Him through ascetic purification; notice, indeed, that unlike the first theophany in ch. 19, Moses is not instructed to refrain from sexual intercourse or to ceremonially wash.

God comes to us.

B. God Proclaims His Name, v. 5b

And when He comes, He proclaims His name. He tells us who He is. This proclamation of the Lord's name, called the Thirteen Attributes by the Jews, is deep and rich and quoted over and over in the rest of Scripture. Why? Because it is the classic statement of the character of God. Who is the LORD? Yes, He is who He is. In one sense, that opening name given in Exodus 3 is the most profound thing one can say about God. But there is more to the story. He is not just self-existent. He is also good, merciful and gracious, abundant in mercy and truth. I am reminded of Plato's statement in his story of the ring of Gyges. A ring which made its possessor invisible and beyond the reach of human justice would allow that possessor to rape, kill, and steal with impunity. He would be, Plato says, *as a god among men*. But is that what a God is? Is that who

Yahweh is? No way. He is slow to anger. He is full of steadfast love and truth. God is not like Zeus or every other pagan god. Jai Paul keeps telling us that the avatars of the Hindu gods came to earth only to destroy — yes, to destroy evil, but still only to destroy. But Yahweh came to save, and His name when He did so was Jesus — Yahweh Saves.

V. God's Response to the Golden Calf. vv. 6-7

So what is our takeaway from this story? How does God show Himself? How is He a (visible) God to go before us?

A. The Mediator Sees God for Us

The answer is that the Mediator sees God for us. Moses was there, in the cleft of the rock, when God came down and showed Himself.

B. The Mediator Tells Us What God Is Like

But not only does the Mediator see God for us. The Mediator tells us what God is like. Do you want a God you can see? You have Jesus, and Jesus sees the Father. Yes, you have to be content with a God you can only hear. He did not have an official portrait painted. There is no mosaic in the pavement of St. Catherine's Monastery that shows the back parts of God. Pilate did not take the time to get Jesus' mug shot. But the Mediator told us and keeps telling us what God is like. How does He know? Because He sees His Father's face, and loves Him, and abides in His love.

Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."

9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. (Joh 14:8-10 NAS)

In this sermon, I trust that you have seen Jesus as your Mediator — and in so seeing, you should say with Jacob "I have seen God. Peniel!" "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (Gen 32:30). Is that how you feel each Sunday? It should be. You have a visible God to go before you. You have seen Jesus in this worship service, and thus you have seen the Father, and that is enough for you. You and I don't need any golden calves. We have the Lord Himself. Amen.