

Exodus 33:1-34:9
Psalm 91
1 John 4

“I Need Thy Presence”

August 27, 2017

Last time, we saw how the whole of Exodus 32 is oriented around *seeing*.

When the people of Israel *saw* that Moses delayed...
When Aaron *saw* that the people worshiped the golden calf...
The LORD says, “I have seen...” the idolatry of the people...
And then Moses *saw* what the people had done...

Exodus 33-34 will continue to emphasize seeing –
but the turning point in Exodus 32-34 is verse 4 of chapter 33:

“When the people *heard* this disastrous word.”

Faith comes by hearing.

They had refused to hear the *gracious* Word of the LORD in chapter 32 –
so now they hear the *disastrous* word – “whoever has sinned against me,
I will blot out of my book...”
“In the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them...”
“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...”

But seeing remains the central image of the passage:

In verse 10, when the people *saw* the pillar of cloud – they would watch Moses.
In verse 12, Moses says to the LORD, “*See* what you have said and done...”
and in verse 13, Moses says, “*See* too that this nation is your people...”
(I know, the ESV says “consider” – but it’s the same verb in Hebrew!)

And then, when the LORD grants Moses’ request,

Moses says, “show me” – “let me see your glory”
And God says “you cannot *see* my face, for man shall not *see* me and live”
You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

So, the *problem* in Exodus 32 was that Israel is walking by *sight* and not by faith.

Remember that the *whole point* of the Exodus is that God *wants* to dwell with humanity.
The problem is that humanity keeps rebelling –
and God is holy.

Some might say,

But if God is so loving and kind, why doesn’t he just forgive all this?!
Well, Moses raised that question in 32:32 – “but now, if you will forgive their sin...”
God, why don’t you just let this one go...
But what happens when you just ‘let this slide?’
If sin is never dealt with, then it keeps getting worse!
Parents, if your child develops a *habit* of lying –
it will not simply “go away” –
patterns and behaviors grow and develop.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 91,

a song that emphasizes the importance of *dwelling* with God.
The one who dwells with God can have confidence in the midst of trouble,
because God is my refuge and my fortress – in *him* I trust!

Sing Psalm 91
Read 1 John 4

What does it mean that “God is love”?

John tells us that there are *two things* that show forth the love of God:

- 1) Verse 9 – “In this the love of God was made manifest among us,
that God sent his only Son into the world,
so that we might live through him.”
In other words, the *incarnation* is the manifestation of God’s love.
If you want to know what God’s love looks like –
look to the incarnation of the Son of God.
- 2) Verse 10 – “In this is love, not that we have loved God
but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

In other words, the *cross* – the atoning sacrifice of Jesus –
is the manifestation of *love*.
If you want to know what love looks like –
look to the God who loved us in such a way
that he gave his only begotten Son
that whosoever believes in him might not perish
but have eternal life.

And then John says in verse 12,
“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,
God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

And so we are reminded of the *first time* that God had taught his people this lesson –
back in Exodus 32-34.

I want you to think about what God says in verses 1-3:

1. The “Evil Word”: Go to the Land Without Me (33:1-6)

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.”

Think about it.

What is God saying here?

Go up to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
saying ‘To your offspring I will give it.’

In other words, God is promising that he will fulfill the promises to Abraham!

What are the three parts of God's promise to Abraham?
The Land, and the Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations.
The first two are clearly restated here – and the third is implied –
since it is through Abraham's seed that the nations will be blessed.

In verse 4, this is called a “disastrous word.”
The word translated “disastrous” is the same word elsewhere translated “evil” or “bad.”
If the gospel is *good news* – then this is *bad news* –
disastrous news!
So if God is promising to fulfill his word to Abraham,
why is it a *disastrous word*?

Because verse 3 says,
“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.”

If you have everything that God promises –
but you do not have God himself –
then you do not have the Gospel.

If you have lots of stuff, if you have lots of kids, if you have everything your heart desires –
but you do not have *God* –
that is a disaster!
That is evil.

And even the people understand that!

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.

Why do the ornaments matter so much?
Well, gold ornaments were used to make the golden calf.
They represent Israel's idolatrous loves.

Israel desperately wanted a God who would be *present* with them.
Indeed, they had made the golden calf so that they would have a god who would be present!

The stripping of the ornaments demonstrates the repentance of Israel.
In the ancient world, wearing fancy clothes and jewelry expressed the attitude of cheerfulness.
So stripping off your ornaments signified humility.

The apostles will tell us that our adornment should not be outward.
We should not wear fancy clothes and jewelry.

And the reason is the same found here in Exodus 33:
the Christian life is a life of repentance.
Our lives should be characterized by the cross –
as Jesus said,
“if any man would come after me,
let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

Yes, we are *looking forward* to the resurrection –
even now, we *participate* in the resurrection life of Jesus –
but *only by way of the cross*.
Fasting should be more common than feasting in the Christian life.

Simplicity should characterize us more than extravagance.

Indeed, when we find ourselves slipping into our culture’s love affair with extravagance
that is precisely when we find ourselves worshipping a golden calf!

Think of how Jesus said it:
“you cannot serve both God and mammon” –
You will either love God or you will love stuff.
You *cannot* love both.

Verses 7-11 describe how bad the situation is.

2. The Tent of Meeting Outside the Camp (33:7-11)

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.

If you think back to the description of the tabernacle in chapters 25-30,
this is really striking.

God’s *plan* is to dwell in the midst of his people.
But *at the moment* his people are unclean.
He cannot dwell in the midst of an unclean people *because he is holy!*
He will have to sanctify them first.

But until then, Moses has to take a tent (it’s the same word that is translated tabernacle –
but the tabernacle hasn’t been built yet!)
and pitch it “far off from the camp.”

And we can see why *so clearly* now!
We have heard about the need for burnt offerings, sin offerings, and peace offerings –
for burning incense, for holy anointing oil, for consecrated priests in holy robes!
In other words, *we need Jesus!!*

But in Exodus 33, Israel’s sin has separated them from God,
and so...

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^[a] 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.*

This *really* highlights the fact that *Moses* has found favor in God's sight –
but Israel has not!
God will still meet with Moses – but he won't get anywhere near Israel!

Then we hear in verse 11:

¹¹ *Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.*

This may sound a little strange at first –
because a few verses later, we will hear that man shall not see God's face and live!
But the fact that the same word is used both here and in verse 20
suggests that “face to face” should not be taken any more literally than “seeing God's face.”

After all, what do we mean by *God's face*?

God is invisible.

He does not have a body like we do.

In Genesis 32:30, Jacob says that he had seen God “face to face” –
just after he had wrestled with the LORD at Peniel.

“Face to face” is an idiom – a way of saying “up close and personal.”

This will be highlighted repeatedly throughout our passage –
over and over you hear the words, “since I have found favor in your sight”
or “you have found favor in my sight.”

Moses is the covenant mediator.

Moses is the *one man* who can speak to God on behalf of Israel.

When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

And at the end of verse 11, we hear about Joshua.

When Moses returned to the camp

Joshua had a habit of remaining behind – in the tent of meeting.

The text never says that the LORD *spoke* to Joshua during these times.

The point is *not* that Joshua had *more* access to God than Moses.

Moses is the one to whom the LORD spoke!

At this time there were no priests.

Aaron and his sons do not get ordained until Leviticus 8.

So Joshua functions as the custodian and guardian of the tent of meeting

until such a time as the priests are consecrated and can begin their duties.

But then we come in verse 12-23 to the heart of our passage:

The intercession of Moses – where Moses, prefiguring our great prophet and priest, Jesus – prays for his people.

3. The Intercession of Moses (33:12-23)

a. Moses Appeals to God's Own Words: I Need Your Presence (v12-13)

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."*

Watch how Moses' intercession works.

He starts with God's own words and promises.

Verse 12 – "See, you say to me...."

"yet you have said..."

therefore, (verse 13)

(When you are praying,

remember God's promises – remember what God has said –

and *start there!!*)

God has commanded Moses to bring Israel up out of Egypt

and to the land that God has promised.

But now there is a question:

will God himself go with them?

or will it simply be God's angel?

Moses now points out that if he has found favor in God's sight,

then he needs to continue to know God in order to find favor in God's sight!

And what does it mean to know God?

Verse 13 – "please show me now your ways"

To *know* God means to know his ways –

as our Shorter Catechism puts it,

"what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

If you *know* someone,

that means that you know their story – and you *know* what they like and don't like.

b. The LORD Agrees (v14)

¹⁴ *And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

God's reply in verse 14 is important.

When he says "my presence will go with you" –

it is actually "my *face* will go with you."

It is not merely an angel – but *I myself* – who will go with you and give you rest.

At this point the *you* is singular.

Now, if God is going with Moses –

then that would *suggest* that God's presence will be *with* Israel.

But Moses wants to make sure!

c. Moses Applies the Principle Further: Your Presence Is What Makes Us Distinct (v15-16)

¹⁵ *And he said to him, "If your presence [your face] will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.*

Think of the great blessing from Numbers 6 –

“The LORD bless you and keep you,
the LORD make his *face* to shine upon you and be gracious to you...”

When the face of God shines upon you,
that means that he is *present* in blessing his people.

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?”*

What makes us distinct?

There are all sorts of things that we can use to make distinctions.

Some of you are Republicans.

Some of you are Democrats.

Some of you are something else entirely!

And yet all of us *together* are a single distinct people.

So politics is what makes us distinct.

Some of you home school – some public school – some private school –
and some of you mix and match!

Education is not what unites us as a distinct 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.”

God’s presence.

Moses nails it.

What makes Israel distinct from every other nation
is the *presence* of the LORD.

What makes the church distinct from every other religion
is the *presence* of Christ – the *presence* of his Spirit.

What is God doing here?

As we saw last time,

God promised Abraham three things:

The Land, and the Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations.

So God’s purpose is to use Israel – as the Seed of Abraham –
that by giving them the Land and the Seed,

he might bring his blessing to all nations
(precisely what he *will* do in Jesus!).

And God does *all of this* by his *presence* –
first with Israel,
then most powerfully in the incarnation of Jesus,
and now by his Holy Spirit as the gospel goes forth to all nations.

I find it fascinating that some atheists will acknowledge
that Christianity identified some really fundamental things about being human –
how to live in community in a way that really values every member of the community.
The whole idea of “being created in God’s image”
has this radically egalitarian impulse that worked its way out through western society.

And now they think that they can detach the doctrine of the image of God
from *God*.

And now we can value everyone – just ignoring the whole “God” thing.

Of course, in their more honest moments,
they will acknowledge that theirs is a dangerous experiment!

It may not work.

For three thousand years people have only valued other people
because they believed that God would be angry if they didn’t.

Take away God, and will people still value other people?

Maybe not.

You can see the impulses in our society running in all sorts of directions:
The animal rights crowd would say that we should apply the same value to animals.
After all, eliminate God, and what exactly is the difference
between a man and a frog?

But the neo-paganism of the white supremacist goes the opposite direction
and says, “Who cares about blacks, Jews, and Asians?
Stick to your tribe!”

Unlike the modern tribalists and kinists

Moses understands that the distinctiveness of Israel is *for the sake* of the nations.

Moses *knows* that God’s promise to Abraham

was the Land, and the Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations –

all because of God’s *presence* with his people.

As one commentator puts it,

“The success of Israel versus their enemies was, in the old covenant, a witness to the world...

It was God’s presence with his people, and all that that implied,
that made his people special.” (Stuart, 703)

And only *through* this chosen people could salvation come to the ends of the earth!

And so again, the LORD agrees (v17)

d. The LORD Agrees (v17)

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."*

And so Moses goes one step further!

e. Okay, Then, "Let Me See Your Glory" (v18)

¹⁸ *Moses said, "Please show me your glory."*

What does Moses mean?

Moses has already seen God's glory on Mt. Sinai!

What does Moses want to see?

"let me see your glory!"

We are getting at one of the central themes of the Christian faith.

If you cannot see God, then how do you know that God is there?!

Moses has seen mighty deeds – in Egypt, at the Red Sea, in the wilderness, and now at Sinai.

But Moses wants to see God *more*.

Let me see your glory!

If you want to understand Moses' request,

listen to how God responds!

Because again the LORD agrees!

We have come a long way since Exodus 4, when Moses tried to get out of his calling!

f. The LORD Agrees (v19-23)

i. The Gracious Name of the LORD (v19)

¹⁹ *And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'*

Moses asks to know God's ways and to see God's glory.

And the LORD says that he will make all his *goodness* pass before him

and will proclaim before Moses "my name, Yahweh."

What will Moses see?

God's "goodness."

And the revelation of God's goodness – the revelation of God's *name* –

will also be the revelation of God's grace and mercy:

And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

I want you to notice something:

seeing God's goodness and *hearing* God's name

are intimately bound together.

God will proclaim his *name* to Moses –

and *therefore* he will be gracious to Israel – he will show mercy to his people.

ii. The Perilous Face of the LORD (v20)

²⁰ But, ” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”

Because we love God, we want to see him!

This is why Moses wants to see God’s glory.

For that matter, this is why the Gentiles fashioned idols.

“They wanted to see with their eyes what they were worshiping.”

(Peter Chrysologous, 149)

But God’s face is perilous – his presence is a *dangerous* thing!

It would be easy to misunderstand this!

It sounds like God is saying that seeing him would bring death.

“for man shall not see me and live.”

But in fact, the precise opposite is true!

The vision of God is that which gives life!

The one who *sees God* sees life itself!

The problem is that humanity is infested with death.

The presence of God is *so* glorious – the face of God is *so full of life* –

that God’s holy life-giving presence would consume the sinful creature.

Ambrose says it well:

“Who shall see my face and live?” Scripture said, and rightly so.

For our eyes cannot bear the sun’s rays,

and whoever turns too long in its direction is generally blinded, so they say.

Now if one creature cannot look upon another creature without loss and harm to himself,

how can he see the dazzling face of his eternal Creator

while covered with the clothing that is this body?

For who is justified in the sight of God,

when the infant of but one day cannot be clean from sin

and no one can glory in his uprightness and purity of heart?” (Ambrose, 151)

As we heard in 1 John 4:12, “No one has ever seen God...”

but “we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son

to be the Savior of the world” (4:14).

It is finally in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus

that we hear the answer to the disastrous word of Exodus 33.

Only the Word who became flesh can finally silence the evil word –

the threat of God’s absence!

In Exodus 33, there is only the slightest foretaste of that glory!

iii. The Hand, the Back, and the Face of the LORD (v21-23)

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.”

To see someone’s back is to see very little.

God is saying, in effect,

“I will show you just the slightest bit of myself.”

You may not see my glory as I pass by –

but once I have passed by, you will see my back –

you will see the effect of my passing.

And to understand this, just look at the event itself at the beginning of chapter 34:

4. The Gracious Name of the LORD (34:1-9)

a. The Two Tablets of Stone (v1-4)

34 The LORD said to Moses, “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³ No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain.” ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone.

First, the LORD tells Moses to cut two new tablets of stone,
so that the LORD can re-write the Ten Commandments.

Remember,

the covenant was *broken*.

That’s why the two tablets were *broken*.

Israel’s sin means that the only way for them to be saved
is if God saves them *in spite of themselves!*

You do realize that this is still the point!

The only way that we can be saved
is if God saves us *in spite of ourselves!*

The wages of sin is death.

Our only hope is if *God* saves us!

Augustine says this well:

“What did he here teach us but that as death is the just due of the clay of the first man,
it belongs to the mercy of god and not to the merits of man that anyone is saved.

And...therein there is no injustice with God,

because he is not unjust either in forgiving or in exacting the penalty.

Mercy is free where just vengeance could be taken.

From this it is more clearly shown what a great benefit is conferred

on the one who is delivered from a just penalty and freely justified,

while another, equally guilty,

is punished without injustice on the part of the avenger.” (Augustine, 149)

And you hear this in the proclamation of the name of the LORD in verses 5-7

b. The Name of the LORD (v5-7)

⁵ *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.*

⁶ *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands,^[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

Notice that with all this emphasis on *seeing* and God’s *face*,
the main focus of the passage is again on *hearing* the *word* and *name* of the LORD.

This is what characterizes our *God!*

When God proclaims his name he is not only describing himself,
he is *promising* to be this way to Israel – and to us.

The LORD is a merciful and gracious God –
he shows mercy and grace

(first to Israel at Sinai – but also to us)

He is slow to anger –

he doesn’t fly off the handle –
he is not easily provoked!

And he abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness.

The word translated “steadfast love” is the word *hesed* –
a Hebrew word with a wide semantic range:

it has to do with being faithful to your promises,
but it also clearly has to do with committed love –

so the old King James translators even created a new word to translate it:
“lovingkindness”

And he not only is “characterized” by steadfast love – by covenant loyalty –
it’s not an “abstract” quality –

it is concrete: “*keeping* steadfast love for thousands...”

What does that look like?

He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin.

Now, he will not clear the guilty.

(In other words, God will never say “oh, sin doesn’t matter!”
God never says, “Go ahead and sin – I don’t care!”)

But he forgives.

We’ll come back to chapter 34 next week,

but we can close today by seeing how Moses understands exactly who God is:

c. The Formal Petition for Forgiveness (v8-9)

⁸ *And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. ⁹ And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked*

people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

God has already promised to do what Moses asks.

But here, as Moses has a “formal audience” with God –
and as God is renewing his covenant with Israel –
re-writing the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone –
Moses asks God to do what he has promised to do:

“Please go in the midst of us (for it is a stiff-necked people),
and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

So if God should come to you

and say, “I’ll give you everything you want –
a great career, a wonderful family, all the stuff in the world...
Just one thing:
I won’t go with you.”

What would you say?

Israel in the wilderness failed a lot of tests!
But they passed this one!

We are a stiff-necked people.

I don’t know how well I would have done that day at Sinai.
But what you need to see from Exodus 33
is that you *need* a mediator.
You need someone who intercedes on your behalf!

And that’s what the incarnation and atonement are all about.

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us,
that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.
In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”