

## The Presence of God

### A Meditation on Exodus 33:1-14

By David Pol

Up to this point in Israel's history, they have had God's presence evident in a very real way. Moses was approached by God in the burning bush. He received the promise that God would be with him in his fight to free Israel. The Israelites as a whole were led out of Egypt in an amazing way. He showed himself to be with them in a pillar of cloud and fire. He dined with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders on Mount Sinai. And now they find themselves under judgement at its foot.

Not too long ago, Moses, their mediator, climbed up the mountain and disappeared into billowing clouds and terrifying light. We read in Exodus 24, "Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai and a cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel."

What a terrifying sight! Israel sees their leader, a tiny and frail human being, ascend the mountain and disappear into this glory. And then nothing. They didn't know exactly what to expect. They had no idea how long he was supposed to be up there. There was just nothing. Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments and instructions on worship from the Lord, but the Israelites don't know that. For forty days and forty nights, there was nothing. It's no wonder that they thought he

was dead. But their response is where they went wrong.

Terrified of the figure on the mountain-top, they decided to scale God down. They wanted something they could interact with and so forced Aaron to make a golden calf. Their intent was to worship God through it. But it got out of control. It was sin for them to image God, especially when they knew that there were heavy penalties for inappropriate worship. But they went ahead anyway and their celebration broke down into a wild party, like those of the pagans before their gods. Israel had just come out of Egypt. That was the kind of worship they were familiar with. And that is the kind of worship they tried to impose on God. And they paid grievously for their sin. But despite that, the Lord is still willing to talk. Once more, the Lord appears in public form before the people of Israel, marking yet another turning point in their relationship with him.

God has told his people in the first three verses that he will abandon them. He is willing to send up his angel with them. He is willing to give them the blessing of the land. But he will not give them his presence. If he does, he says, he will consume them in his anger in a moment.

As a sign of mourning, the people take off all their ornaments. All of their bangles which they would have worn while celebrating in front of the golden calf are left behind. They

have the right perspective now. Physical blessings are of no value compared to the surpassing greatness of the presence of God. God encourages them in this, commanding them to remove their ornaments. And so they pray, stand and wait.

Having heard the command of the LORD to go up, Moses is shattered. He says, "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 grace in my sight.'" Moses knows the chances of Israel alone in the wilderness are a candle in the wind. Even if the Lord *does* send his Angel ahead, as he promised (33:2), Israel will ultimately be destroyed. The Angel will drive out the nations ahead of them, but it won't help. Israel might not be destroyed from without, but without the Lord they will be destroyed from within. With this knowledge in mind, Moses *begs* the Lord his God to show mercy to Israel. He says, "Please! That's not enough! We need *you*."

We sometimes find ourselves following God because of the blessings he grants us. If God is blessing us, we're happy. If he is not, we ask him, "Why not?" But here, God is offering Israel something special. Essentially, he's offering his blessings without his presence. If you were to have that choice, would you take it?

Israel did not take the choice. They saw how incredibly important it was for them to have God. Without God, they knew that anything that set them apart was worthless. God alone made them special in the world, and they

wouldn't trade that for anything. And so, they wait in breathless anticipation for the Lord's reply.

Finally: The Lord's response to this shows his character. He is the Lord who delivered them, yes. But this response will show what kind of a God he truly is. Is he merciful? Can we trust him, even after we fail?

In response to this, Moses asks God: "Show me your ways." He is asking for more than a simple direction to the Promised Land. He is asking for God to reveal what he wants from Israel. He is asking for God to demonstrate his faithful character. He is requesting that God show what kind of God he is to Moses.

Moses also calls on God to remember this promise: "I know you by name, and you have also found grace in my sight." God is talking to Moses in particular. Moses himself has found grace in the sight of God. Realizing this, Moses uses this to find favour with God on behalf of the people. He really understands that his position has made him a mediator. So on behalf of the people of Israel, he is saying to God, "For *my* sake, for the grace that you have shown to *me*, show mercy to your people."

Suddenly, delightfully, God answers Moses. Moses understood the incredible grace God would have to show and did not take it for granted that God *would* reply. But he counted on the faithful character of God to win through. He counted on God to be willing to forgive a repentant people, however stubborn they were. God simply answers, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Oh what beautiful words these are for us today! How precious they are! They are an image of the reality that is ours today. We have a new and better mediator than Moses. We have someone who is greater. We have someone who has shown us God's ways. He said, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me – if you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Christ came down to show the Father to the people of Israel. Just as God will dwell among the people of Israel by the request of the mediator Moses, so God dwells among his people for the sake of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Just as Israel had Moses, bringing the people to God, so Jesus brings his people to God. And we get to see the glory of the Father in Christ.

God will answer you because of *our* mediator, Jesus. He will pursue you when you call out to him in faith because of Christ. The Good Shepherd loves each sheep that he calls his own. *"To him the doorkeeper opens, and the*

*sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."* He loves them enough to lay down his life for them. Let that knowledge be precious to you. Call out to him in the hour of our need and he will deliver you. As Isaiah says, "But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, (...). Fear not, for I have redeemed you' I have called you by your name; You are mine." In your struggles. In your loneliness. In the times when the world feels dark and there is no way out – *call out to him!* As God heard Moses when he said, *"O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."* So God also hears Christ and has made us children and heirs with him.



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