

EXODUS CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

V.1-11

1. Before the construction of the tabernacle there was a place where people could inquire of the Lord. We read about a “tent of meeting” outside of the camp where anyone who wanted to ask God something could go.
2. Many translations use the term “tent of meeting” also where the Tabernacle is meant, which leads to confusion. It is obvious that the tent mentioned is not the same as the Tabernacle, since it was positioned outside the camp and the tabernacle occupied the central place in the camp.
3. The reason for the placement outside the camp is not given. Moses may have felt that the quietness of the wilderness was more conducive to intimate fellowship with God than the hustle and noise of the camp.
4. There is, however, a hidden meaning in this placement. It was outside the camp that the carcasses of certain sacrificial animals were burned and the condition of a leper was examined. The writer of the Hebrews epistle makes a point of this place outside the camp, when he says: *“The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.”* (ch. 13) This is the very place Moses designates for fellowship with God. It is the place where Christ suffered and paid for the sins of the world.
5. If Moses had chosen the place to be totally away from the public eye, his purpose is defeated by the attitude of the people. They follow his every move and stand in awe for the fellowship this man knew with God, a fellowship, they felt, which lay beyond their own reach.
6. Concerning this relationship, as the end of this section we read a very significant sentence about Joshua, that whenever Moses returned to the camp, Joshua stayed continually in the tent of meeting. Joshua had discovered the source of Moses’ greatness, and he decided that he would not leave that place until he drank his fill. About such an attitude Jesus would say about Mary: *“Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* (Luke 10)
7. It is in this Tent of Meeting that the coming conversation between God and

Moses takes place.

8. The Lord told Moses to leave the Mount and lead the people forward to the Promised Land. So, it might seem that God had decided against building the Tabernacle at this point. But that is not the case. God is simply looking to a point after the Tabernacle is constructed. Once that is accomplished, then the people will move out. The Israelites would remain at the foot of Mount Sinai for the construction of the tabernacle.
9. Without the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant, Israel would have nothing to distinguish itself from other nations on the earth. It would symbolize in a graphic way that the LORD Himself was in their midst.
10. This conversation between God and Moses was a continuation of the one begun in the previous chapter. But not everything we read was said during one session; clearly there were interruptions in this dialog. For instance, v. 5 says that the Lord told Moses to order the people to take off all their jewelry, yet in the previous verse we read that the people had already begun to mourn and had not put on any ornamentations, then v. 6 says they stripped off their ornaments. Clearly, Moses must have gone back and forth between the Tent of Meeting and the camp to convey the message to the people and their reaction makes God change His mind (from our human point of view).
11. In the first three verses of this chapter there is an interesting mixture of promise and punishment.
12. God reminds Moses of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He would give the land of the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites to their descendants. An angel, one of God's created supernatural beings, would lead them to the land and help them conquer it, but the Shekinah – God's visible presence – would not go with them.
13. It is these words that trigger the people's repentance. They go into mourning. Their attitude shows that they understand the magnitude of their sin. In making the Golden Calf they had withdrawn themselves from the protection of the blood of the lamb that had saved them from death in Egypt and brought them out of bondage. They had forfeited their lives. Mourning is connected with death, and sin and death are closely related.
14. During this conversation we are given a glimpse into Moses' intimate relationship with God. v. 11 tells us God and Moses would speak "face to face," as one person would talk to another. It is this close personal fellowship with God that is recognized by the people.
15. God testifies to this Himself at a later time when He says about Moses: "*With*

him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord."

(Numbers 12) This fact is stated as an introduction to the next event, which is one of the highlights of the whole Old Testament. Moses asks God to show him His glory. The lowest point in Israel's history is transformed into a peak of spiritual experience.

Q. Of whom else can it be said that God spoke to them "face to face" and "without riddles?"

v. 12-23

1. God had told Moses that He would no longer be present among the people to lead them into the Promised Land. Moses tells the Lord flatly that this is unacceptable. Again, we are not given a detailed account of the conversation. What we read seems to be a rough outline of the discussion. We may paraphrase Moses' words as follows: "You tell me to lead this people, but I cannot do that. They are not my people, but Yours. If You love me, as You say You do, You cannot do this to me." This doesn't sound like the language of prayer. Yet, God is, apparently, soon swayed. He agrees immediately to change the verdict and to return to His place as the leader of the nation. One has to know God well in order to be able to say "No" to Him. Moses' insistence is, obviously, according to the will of God.
2. One of the great lessons of Moses' attitude at this point seems to be that there can be a wrongly resting in our circumstances. There may be times in our lives when God is pleased when we resist what overcomes us, even if our circumstances are ordained by Him. This may sound contradictory, but the key for knowing when to accept and when to resist lies in the understanding of the love of God.
3. At times God's love and mercy may be severe and we need insight into the character of God to know the difference between bowing and standing up. Moses did the right thing when he refused God's proposal and God richly rewarded him for it.
4. Moses says some very deep things to God. It seems redundant to tell the omniscient God, "*You know me by name,*" but it appears that there are with God different levels of knowing us.
Jesus says to the "goats," "*I never knew you. Away from me, you!*" (Matthew 7) Clearly, knowing, in this context, stands for an intimate relationship. That is why Paul says: "*The man who loves God is known by God.*" (First Corinthians 8) So,

Moses says to God: "I love You and You tell me that You love me." And the statement: "you have found favor with Me," would be correctly interpreted as: "I have forgiven you your sins." Moses thus transfers this intimate relationship between God and himself to the whole nation.

5. Moses also wants to increase in his love for God by better understanding His character. "Teach me Your ways so I may know You and continue to find favor with You," is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul's deepest desires. The apostle wrote: *"I want to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."* (Philippians 3)
6. The beauty of Moses' entreating with God is that, not only he wants to increase in love and knowledge, but also that his motive for doing so is the salvation of the people of Israel. The words *"Remember that this nation is your people,"* are used in this context. David expresses the same desire when he says: *"Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long."* (Psalm 25) And David also confirms later that God answered Moses' prayer. He wrote: *"He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel."* (Psalm 103)
7. At this point it must be said that it was never Moses' intention that he would be the only one in the nation who would know God in such an intimate way. Moses' relationship with God was to be the normal standard for all the Israelites. That is why, at a later date, he said: *"I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"* (Numbers 11)
8. In all this, Moses is an image of our Lord Jesus Christ. The man Jesus had a relationship with God that has never been equaled by any other human being. While on earth, He set the example for us as to how to pray, how to know Scripture, how to live, and how to suffer and die. As Peter says: *"If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."* (First Peter 2) Jesus' relationship with the Father was to our benefit. In Jesus' own words: *"For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."* (John 17)
9. God seems to be quickly swayed by Moses' words. Without offering any of the former objections that His presence would mean the annihilation of the people, God says: *"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* The words "I will give you rest," stand for a whole concept of entering into a position of victory over

evil and the powers of darkness and of proclaiming the majesty of God. God rested on the seventh day of the week of creation. There is also a rest after the completion of the new creation in Jesus Christ. The author of the Hebrew epistle focuses upon this truth when he says: *“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God”* (ch. 4)

10. The Bible often puts the entrance of Israel into Canaan in the perspective of the ultimate victory over evil which disrupted God’s creation. The rest God promises to Israel is an image of the real rest that is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (Second Corinthians 5)
11. Moses states a timeless truth with his answer to God in **v. 15-16**. The difference between those who are the children of God and those who aren’t is in the presence of God Himself. That is the only distinction that has value. No name or sticker or form of organization or lifestyle can substitute for the reality of Christ with us and in us.
12. Note that Moses had used this argument before. In the previous chapter he had used the argument “what will the Egyptians say?” in order to dissuade God from destroying the people. Here it is put in a positive way. The people had fallen into a very serious sin that could have meant their annihilation. Moses pleads with the LORD to have their testimony restored, so that the world may know that there is a God Who reveals Himself to the world.
13. The word “favor” or “grace” in Hebrew means, “graciousness,” in the subjective sense, or, objectively, “beauty.” That is a different connotation than simply “pleased.” It is undeserved kindness and love. So, God agrees with Moses and tells him He will do what he asked.

Q. Why do you think God “changed His mind” and agreed to accompany the people once more?

14. Having received this reassurance, Moses asks of God the greatest request anyone has ever asked: *“Now show me your glory.”* It is wonderful to find grace with God and to be His friend is even more, but Moses understood that this was only the beginning of the realization of God’s plan with man. The ultimate purpose is that we would not only know about His glory, but share His glory. The

Bible testifies to this from the Old Testament on to the end of the New Testament. The psalmist says: *"You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory."* (Psalm 73) And Jesus, speaking about His disciples, says to the Father: *"I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are One."* (John 17) Paul describes our present condition with the words: *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* (Second Corinthians 3) And, later, writing to the Colossians, he says: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* (ch.1) Also, the writer of the Hebrews defines God's purpose with us, as Christ bringing us to glory. We read: *"In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering."* (ch. 2) And, Peter tells the elders of the church that he is: *"a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed."* (First Peter 5) Finally, John, describing the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem, says: *"It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."* (Revelation 21) So, there is ample proof from the Bible as a whole that Moses' request was not outrageous. He did not exceed the limits of propriety. He understood something of God's purpose in creating man in His image.

15. God certainly does not refuse Moses' request, but He modifies it so that Moses would be able to see the glory and stay alive. If God would reveal His glory to us in all its fullness, our human bodies and minds would not be able to bear it. It would mean our physical death. Daniel fainted when he was approached by the Angel of the LORD – the preincarnate Christ appearing as an angel. He described the experience as follows: *"So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale, and I was helpless. Then I heard Him speaking, and as I listened to Him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees."* (ch. 10)
16. John, the beloved disciple, who knew Jesus more intimately than any of the others, when he saw Jesus in the glory of His resurrection, says: *"When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead."* (Revelation 1) Our bodies are not built for this kind of revelation and, probably, our minds would not be able to absorb the intensity of it.
17. Yet God is longing to reveal Himself to His beloved servant Moses and He takes all the precautions necessary to protect him from harm. The main part of the revelation will be in the Word of God. In our present New Testament era the

emphasis is upon hearing, not seeing. Paul emphasizes this when he says: *"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."* (Romans 10) And Jesus indicates that God's mode of revelation is by the Word, not through what we see. That is why He says to Thomas: *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* (John 20) As far as seeing the glory of the Father is concerned, Jesus says: *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."* (John 14)

18. God now describes what He will do about Moses' request in y.19-23. Some of these words are hard to grasp. What does it mean that God makes His goodness pass by Moses and pronounces His Name in his presence? All goodness is definitely derived from God. He is the ultimate good. It appears that God lets His goodness pass in front of Moses as an indication of the standard against which all goodness is to be measured.
19. It is important to understand this in the context of the law that God had just given to Moses. The commandments are not just rules to determine the limits of human behavior, they are expressions of the character of God. That is why it can be said that the law is good. We tend to see laws as restrictions of human liberty. It is true that God's goodness restricts evil, but it also means that God blesses us and fills our lives with His goodness. James puts it this way: *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."* (ch. 1)
20. Goodness is an absolute that in its full and complete form can only be found in God, but at the same time it is a characteristic to which we can relate. We experience goodness as something that agrees with us, that fills and satisfies us. When we encounter goodness we realize that this is what we were made for; it is the reason for our existence. In God's goodness we find all His perfections of love, kindness, gentleness and beauty wrapped together.
21. So, although Moses was not able to experience God's goodness in all its fullness, God allowed him to get a taste of it, to whet his appetite, so to speak, for things to come. Now, in Heaven, Moses drinks his fill of God's goodness continuously. Then, he could only touch it and lick his finger.
22. God also says: *"I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence."* This phrase makes us realize how far we have strayed from our origin. For us, names are almost meaningless. They are a little better than numbers. Shakespeare asked the famous question, "What's in a name?" And the meaning of it is, that names make no difference. They did make all the difference in the world when man was still in fellowship with God. Didn't God say to Moses: *"I know you by name?"* This meant

that God knew Moses intimately. David would say later: "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me." (Psalm 139)

23. Thus, God tells Moses, "I will tell you Who I am." This is an invitation to search and know God: to know Him intimately, as God knows us. In this too, Moses received only a foretaste of things to come. Paul opens the window on a wider perspective when he says: *"It is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us."* (First Corinthians 2) Truly, not even the half has yet been told us!

24. God describes His own character with the words mercy and compassion. Those words, obviously, have great relevance in the relationship God has with Fallen sinners. We need mercy because we are guilty, and we need compassion because we are lost. Jesus paints so beautifully the picture of the Father's attitude toward His wayward children in the parable of the prodigal son. We read: *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."* (Luke 15)

25. Mercy is a word that fits in a legal context. It presupposes guilt and exchanges pardon for punishment. Compassion describes an emotional reaction to a condition in which one of God's creatures has fallen from the place God had intended him to occupy. It is love acting to save and heal. Both words are perfect descriptions of what God has done for man and for the whole of creation since Satan temporarily succeeded in separating man from God. Mercy is extended to the guilty because of the sacrifice God Himself would bring in His Son who died on the cross and compassion is demonstrated in the saving of man's soul through the Gospel.

26. All this was only visible in outline form when God revealed Himself to

Moses. It is abundantly clear to us now. The apostle Paul quotes God's words to Moses in a different context of God's election. In Romans, speaking about Israel's role in the history of God's revelation of Himself in this world, he writes: *"Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."* (ch. 9)

27. Now, please be aware that unless we understand that Paul is speaking about God's choice of Israel as the wardens of His revelation in this world and not about personal salvation, we have a hard time grasping the meaning of the Apostle's words. Nowhere in the Bible is it taught that God would purposely keep salvation from a man who is eager to be saved. God does not reject anyone who sincerely seeks Him. At the same time, a man who rejects God and His Gospel in Christ cannot blame God.

28. When God says to Moses: *"you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live,"* He does not only indicate that man could not look at God because the frailty of his physical body would not be able to bear the stress, but also that there is a moral restriction. We cannot see God face to face and continue living the life we are living now. In our present condition, we are all condemned to death. No one will escape death. Seeing God, the One who cannot die, Who is the source of life, and then continuing to live a life of the dying would be impossible. That is why God says: "No one may see Me and live." It is a moral impossibility as well as a physical one.

29. The solution God offers to Moses in **v.21** is pregnant with spiritual significance. We can hardly read these words without thinking of Paul's explanation of the spiritual significance of the rock in Israel's crossing of the desert. He says: *"They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."* (First Corinthians 10) In Christ we are all hidden in the cleft in the rock and covered with the hand of God. Of course, this also reminds us of the beautiful hymn "Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me." In Christ, we may behold the glory of God and at the same time we are protected against the harmful shine of His radiance.

30. Moses' experience was both a spiritual one and a physical one. Still, it should go without saying that the picture that is described here is anthropomorphic. When God talks about His "hand," "back," and "face" He speaks in terms

that we can understand. Obviously, God does not have a hand, a back and a face in the sense that we know it. What we know as hand, back, and face are images of God's reality, for God is pure spirit. What happens to Moses is put into terms we can understand.

31. Still, it is hard to understand what actually happened to Moses. Moses asked God to show him on earth what, actually, can only be seen in heaven. We have very little understanding what God did when He created heaven and earth and expressed Himself, as a Spirit, in material things. He, who had no image, created man in His image. We understand something of the principle when we look at a sculpture. Through the genius of the sculptor, a lump of clay or a form of bronze or of marble can convey emotions and values that may affect us deeply. An artist can give form to color on a canvas and express things that go far beyond the material he uses. And music is more than a series of vibrations of the air that fall upon our eardrum: it is beauty, emotion, value and truth. So, when God passed by Moses, He conveyed things that went far beyond what can be put into words. It did not transform Moses into a heavenly being yet, but it kindled in him an unquenchable thirst for things to come. May Moses' experience do the same to us. *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42)*

Q. What is the closest a Believer can come to "seeing God's glory" today?