

**Studies in Exodus No. 39**  
**Exodus 33:1-11; 34:29-35**  
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We are taking the beginning and the end of what remains of historical narrative in Exodus. You will see, as we read them, that they belong together. In fact they form an *inclusio*, surrounding the revelation of Yahweh's glory to Moses. We have said on a number of occasions that Exodus is the story of Yahweh's presence with his people. That is the theme again in our text this evening, but in a melancholy way. We are face to face with God's presence, but also with the fact that it has been removed from his people because of their sins of unbelief and disobedience.

**Text Comment**

v.3 The emphatic point of this narrative is that a substitution is taking place. An angel will have the task of leading Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Yahweh himself is putting distance between himself and his people. We tend to think that Israel's rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, when they followed the advice of the 10 faithless spies, was the reason this generation was consigned to perish in the wilderness and never to see the Promised Land. Perhaps so, but a separation between Yahweh and this generation of Israel had already occurred. What we have here is a virtual refusal on Yahweh's part to be too closely allied with Israel. Moses will appeal this refusal in vv. 15ff. and the Lord will relent *to a degree*. But, as we will see, Israel will not know the Lord's presence as she once did. This, along with the promise of punishment in 32:34, is the first hint of what is to come.

The problem is that the Lord's patience with Israel has been exhausted.

v.4 This gesture was a reaction to the news of the moment – an act of mourning – but it was to become a custom in Israel not to wear gold jewelry. Not only had this sort of jewelry been used to make the golden bull, but the Lord would have need of it for the making of the vessels to be used in the sanctuary (35:22). Israel, even though often and sometimes largely an unbelieving community, would have seemed to the peoples of her world a puritanical people, in worship, in morals, and in dress. That should regularly be the case and Christians should learn to wear the reproach of the world as a crown.

v.7 “Tent of Meeting” is a name later to be given to the Tabernacle (cf. 39:32), but the Tabernacle had not yet been built. This tent is a temporary and preliminary structure. What is clear once again is that the location of the tent “outside the camp” represented a separation between Yahweh and the people. Remember, the plan that Moses received from the Lord required the Tabernacle to be in the middle of the camp, with the 12 tribes distributed around it in a square. Yahweh is not removing his presence altogether, but he will not dwell in the midst of the camp. The camp had been defiled by the golden bull and its worship. The Holy God would not now make his dwelling in the midst of such a people. Moses, as we will learn, would go out to the tent and return from it; the people would prostrate themselves at a distance when the presence of God descended on the tent;

but they did not go near, except as individuals. And the individual who went to the meeting to seek guidance, to pray, to worship, had, so to speak, to separate himself from his own people. But once there, outside the camp – language that the author of Hebrews will use in 13:13 – willing to make that separation, communion with the Lord was still possible. The people, in any case, are represented here as chastened and, once again, dutiful servants of the Lord, doleful over the Lord’s threatened separation from them on account of their sin. Time would prove the repentance shallow and short-lived.

v.11 In Num. 12:8 the phrase is “mouth to mouth.” The point is not that Moses literally *saw* God – something the Bible elsewhere tells us no one ever has and that is impossible in any case – but that Yahweh spoke to Moses directly, not in dreams and visions. It was the greatest role of Moses to say to Israel what had been said to him directly by the Lord. He stands first in a long line of men who would be the instruments of the Lord’s revelation.

34:29 As you may remember, the Vulgate mistranslated the verb and rendered it “having horns [*cornutus, -a, -um*]” rather than “was radiant.” That is why Moses appears with horns in some medieval works of art.

This is Moses’ second descent from the summit of Mt. Sinai with two new tablets replacing those that he had destroyed before the golden calf.

v.31 As we will see, it is a point of some importance that the people’s initial fear of Moses’ radiant face was easily overcome.

What is very important to understand and what is usually not understood is that this last paragraph, 34:29-35, makes the same point as did the first two we read from the beginning of chapter 33. It is describing nothing less than the distance, the remove at which Israel now lived from Yahweh on account of her unbelief and her disobedience. The Lord, in answer to Moses’ intercession, did not remove his presence from the people, but his presence could no longer be enjoyed by them as once it was. In other words, Moses’ veiling his radiant face has the same meaning as does the Lord sending an angel with Israel instead of himself and Moses’ pitching the tent of meeting not in the center of Israel’s encampment, but outside it. It is true that Moses’ intercession, of which we read in 33:15-17, results in some relaxation of the Lord’s separation of himself from Israel, but only some. The tent remains outside the camp and Moses continues to veil his face. But what does that act signify? Does it really imply Yahweh’s judgment of Israel and his withdrawing of himself from her?

Here we read only the bare bones of the story. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with a radiant face, reflecting the glory of the Lord in whose presence he had been. Afterward this happened repeatedly, whenever he entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord. He would come away with a radiant face. He would then deliver to the people whatever communication he had received from the Lord and then would veil or cover his face.

It is, however, a commonplace of OT revelation that access to the glory of God, the sight of God’s glory, is a powerful symbol of both acceptance with God and the immense privilege it is

to be granted that acceptance. When Paul will later say, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” or, as the NEB has it, “have been deprived of God’s glory,” he is using the idea to make the same point. Sin deprives us of God’s glory, of the privilege of seeing it and being present before it. *And that is what happened here.* Israel was deprived of God’s glory. She would see it when Moses was delivering God’s word, but after that it was covered so that she could not see it. *This was an act of judgment on Moses’ part.*

Now this has not been widely understood in large part because of a serious misunderstanding of Paul’s use of this history in 2 Cor. 3. I invite your attention to that text because the interpretation of our text is given in that text, if only it is properly translated and properly understood.

The story of the interpretation of 2 Cor. 3 is too long and too complicated to tell in any detail here, but a few points are essential to make.

1. *First, the NIV’s translation of vv. 7, 11, and 13 is a very consequential mistake.*

It became common to render the verb (*katargeo*) “fading” in modern scholarship, but the case for that translation is very weak and is being abandoned as we speak. Those of you who have the ESV before you will see that they did not translate the verb as “fading” but as “brought to an end.” The translators of the ESV would not commit such a blunder. The verb is an important word for Paul, occurring some 14 times in his letters and in key contexts. It never means fading. It always means “to nullify, cancel, or do away with.”

The question then becomes: how was the glory cancelled, or nullified, or done away with. And the obvious answer is that it was done away with by Moses’ veil. This is, in fact, precisely what Paul himself goes on to say in v. 13 and explains the reason as being Israel’s hardness of heart, a condition, he says in vv. 14-15, that still afflicts Israel in his day.

It is worth pointing out that Exodus 34 says nothing about the glory on Moses’ face fading away. It is also worth pointing out that Paul’s argument in 2 Cor. 3 does not have anything to do with a difference *in the glory* between Moses’ time and his own. Paul is talking about two different responses to the gospel. He admits as he begins this section at the end of chapter 2 that, as a preacher of the gospel, sometimes he is an aroma of life and sometimes an aroma of death; sometimes he rings the bell of salvation and sometimes he rings the funeral bell of eternal life. The difference isn’t in the gospel itself, it lies instead in the response that men make to that gospel, some with faith, some with unbelief. As so often elsewhere in the New Testament, Israel is brought in as an example of those people who hear the gospel but who do not believe.

At the end of this section Paul makes the same point. In 2 Cor. 4:1-6 he admits again that he too gets both responses. He speaks of his gospel being veiled to those who are perishing and the result – once again back to the example of Exodus 34 – is that they cannot see the light of the gospel in the glory of Christ.”

In summary, Paul is talking about a gospel ministry and the two different results it produces depending upon whether people believe or do not believe. He contrasts Moses’ ministry to an

unbelieving people with his own to the Corinthians who believed in large numbers. Moses had to veil his face, a sign of God's judgment; Paul did not, at least he didn't in Corinth.

2. *Second, Paul's use of the concept of "boldness" in his argument demonstrates that Paul at least thought that Moses' veiling of his face was a sign of shame and mourning.*

I'll simplify the argument but it is a key point in Paul's argument that, no matter how strained their relationship had become, he can deal with the Corinthians in freedom and boldness. In 3:12 he contrasts his behavior with Moses'. He says, "We are very bold...not like Moses..." The word translated "bold" is a word that was taken over from Greek into Aramaic and, in Aramaic, is often found being used synonymously with a proverbial expression meaning "to uncover the face." In Aramaic, "to cover the face" is a sign of shame and mourning while "to uncover the face" is a sign of confidence and freedom. There are many arguments that can be raised in support of the conclusion and I won't bore you with those, but the conclusion is important. Once again, Paul is contrasting his ministry with that of Moses. Moses had to cover his face – a sign of mourning and shame – because of Israel's unbelief. That, by the way, is the conclusion we would come to simply reading Exodus 34 in its own context. Israel had betrayed the Lord and didn't deserve to bask in the reflected glory of God. Paul did not have to employ such a device because the Corinthians had responded to Paul's gospel preaching with faith. Paul's ministry was different from Moses because the Corinthians' response to it was different than Israel's response to Moses' ministry. *That is the difference. Both in Exodus 33-34 and in 2 Cor. 3 the subject is the vast difference that faith makes!* Now I won't go any further into 2 Cor. 2-4 and Paul's argument there. But I want to help you see the significance of understanding Exodus 34 and 2 Cor. 3 in these terms.

The typical evangelical, even the typical Reformed commentator on Exodus 34:29-35 and 2 Cor. 3 finds here a contrast between the two epochs and a demonstration of the inferiority of the OT in comparison with the NT. Believe me, I spent a year of my life working on 2 Cor. 3 and that is very widely the view taken. The idea of "fading" glory fits neatly into that interpretation. The fact that the glory was fading indicates that the religion of Moses was impermanent, defective, and needed to be replaced by something permanent and lasting. With respect to Exodus 34 the idea then is that Israel did not have full access to the presence of God – a fact indicated by Moses' veil – but now, in the Christian era we do.

But that is not what either text says. It is very plainly what neither text actually says. The problem for Israel was not that they could not enjoy the presence of God. They could. They had! The problem is that they had lost that presence because of their sin. Moses hadn't lost it, but Israel as a whole had.

But, what is more, we can lose it too. There is nothing that happens in Exodus 32-34 that doesn't happen again in the NT era. Paul makes a point on several occasions of warning his readers that God's rejection of Israel in the wilderness is an example of what could happen to us if we do not live before him in faithfulness. Hebrews is one long argument that what happened to Israel – who heard the gospel but did not combine it with faith, as he says in chapter 4 and were, for that reason, excluded from God's rest – will happen to anyone who does the same thing. To a *Christian congregation*, he writes:

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.... The Lord will judge his people. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

And among the very last words the incarnate Christ addresses to his church are those to the church in Laodicea in Rev. 3:14-22:

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

The effect of those interpretations of texts like these that find the point in the inferiority of the OT arrangements, in Mosaic religion, and, contrarily, the superiority of the NT arrangements, is to suggest that now, in the new epoch, *we have what Israel did not*. They had limited access to God but we have full access. Their religious provision could take them only part way to God, but ours takes us all the way. I have heard such interpretations all my life; you have too. But they aren't true. They aren't true by the express, the repeated, and the emphatic witness of the Bible itself. We are, as the NT is always reminding us, in the same spiritual situation Israel was in; we live in the same spiritual world, we have the same alternatives set before us: faith and salvation on the one hand, or unbelief and judgment on the other. The problem with Israel and the reason for Moses' veil had nothing to do with any defect in the covenant God had made with her; *it had only to do with her lack of faith*. And church people in the new era can be just as guilty of that lack of faith; indeed *have been* guilty of it on a far larger scale than anything known in Moses' day. We are warned of this over and over again in the New Testament. If there is some putative difference between the salvation and the presence of God that could be experienced by believers in the OT and believers in the NT, we are never told what it is. And Israel in the wilderness *is never used* as an example of believing people in the NT; she is always presented as what we must not be, an unbelieving and disobedient people, what we must not be but what we could be if we are not faithful to the Lord Jesus!

The problem with interpretations of Exodus 34:29-35 that take the symbolism of Moses' veil as having to do with the defective condition of the OT covenant is that we then miss the powerful warning of this text. We assume that it is not addressed to us. But Israel at Sinai is a people about to be finally rejected by the Lord and that because of her unbelief and disobedience. That is the warning the NT writers take from this history, not some putative inferiority in the OT arrangements. They press this history home and we should press it home to our own hearts. We must not be like Israel at Mt. Sinai; if we are, the same thing will happen to us that happened to them: they will lose the presence of God and fall under his wrath!

One has only to ask the question: against how many members of Christendom today, against how many of those 2 billion plus people, would Moses veil his face or would Paul say that his gospel was veiled? Israel at the foot of Sinai, with the tent outside the camp, and with a veil over Moses' radiant face, alas, may represent the largest part of the Christian church in the world today.

But there is something else to say in conclusion. To many Christians – by that I mean, to many people in the church today – Israel’s situation, as described in Exodus 33 and 34 is ideal. They don’t want to have God too close – surely not at their office, perhaps least of all at their home. Yet they don’t want to lose touch with God altogether. [Clowney, *Preaching Christ in all of Scripture*, 97] They would not have even unbelieving Israel’s good sense to mourn and wail the partial withdrawal of the Lord’s presence. Actually they prefer it that way. They want the Tent of Meeting a few miles away from home. They can go there and come back of a Sunday morning and go on with life without much more thought about it.

But Moses knew better. If God did not go with Israel, they might just as well be a pagan people. What difference was there between them and the other nations any longer? But Christianity, true Christianity, subjective redemption, absolutely offers the privilege of the living God’s presence with his people and absolutely requires it. Here is the great different between the Muslim and the Christian understanding of God, of the knowledge of God, and of salvation. Islam’s God is God at a distance; Christianity’s God is the God who has drawn near. Islam’s God can never be known; the living God makes himself known to individuals. In John 1 we read of God making his tabernacle among us and in 2 Cor. 3 we read of beholding the glory of God with unveiled faces.

But, if that beholding the glory of God is a reality for human beings, if it is really possible to know the presence of God personally, then it becomes hugely important that we live in that presence in faithfulness. We must keep the covenant God has made with us; and that we live in faith and obedience in recognition of the great, the impossibly great favor the Lord has bestowed upon us that we sinners should be his children. If we do not, we are offending against the very presence of God. And if we prove ourselves a stiff-necked people, as the Lord warns us in 33:5: “he might destroy us.” To behold the glory of God is a privilege that comes with a warning: don’t make light of this privilege or God will hold you to account! *That* is the first lesson of these texts from Exodus 33 and 34.