

Covenant Renewed

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 33:1-34:35

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Prosperity without Presence

I want to begin this morning with a religious sales pitch. I think you're going to like it, but let the buyer beware; there's also fine print. Here's the pitch. How would you like to have a religion that guarantees you perfect peace and prosperity? Would you like to have complete protection from your enemies, including the enemies of disease and death? Would you like to have assurance that you can be successful in every area of your life? Including military success, political success, and economic success? How does all of that sound? Do you want that? It sounds pretty good, wouldn't you agree? But here's the fine print: All this peace and prosperity will *not* include a personal relationship with God. Do you still want what I'm selling?

That's what's going on in our text this morning. Following the incident with the golden calf in Exodus 32, God says he'll still keep his end of the bargain; he'll still keep the covenant he made with Israel. In verse 1, God says he's still going to bring Israel into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey (v. 3). So they'll have prosperity. And in verse 2, he promises protection. He'll drive out the Canaanites. But in verse 3 he says, "I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."¹ If God was present among them, he'd end up wiping them out because they're so sinful (cf. v. 5).

So, God will give Israel the good life in the land, but it will be a life without God. Is that a good deal? What do you think?

Tim Keller says this is the kind of religion most Americans want. A life of peace and prosperity without a personal relationship with God.² Phil Ryken says this is actually the kind of religion most *Christians* want. They're content with the past decision they made for Christ so they can go to heaven (to the Promised Land), but they're not actually living in a relationship with God.³ What about you? Are you satisfied with the promise of heaven without relationship?

For Moses this was not a good proposition. Remember, Exodus 32-34 falls in the middle of a section on the tabernacle, which we'll begin studying next week. And at the beginning of the tabernacle section, God says the whole reason for the tabernacle was so God would dwell in the midst of his people (Ex. 25:8). That was the ultimate goal of the whole Exodus. And now that goal is being abandoned. Moses is not content with God's proposition.

And neither are the Israelites. We're told in verse 4 this announcement was "disastrous" news for them. It didn't lead them to celebrate. It led them to mourn. It even led them to repent. We're told twice that they removed their ornaments. These ornaments were likely connected with their idolatry. The ornaments also represented their material prosperity. But they determined having God's presence with them was more important than any material protection or prosperity.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

² Tim Keller, "Glory in Your Life"

³ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, Preaching the Word

What about you? Do you only want material blessings? Or are you willing to forfeit your material possessions in order to pursue God's presence? Phil Ryken says that our bank account and our budget are like a spiritual echocardiogram. They measure the soundness of our heart before God.⁴ Israel had a hard heart toward God, but now we see signs of repentance. They want God more than their stuff! What about you?

Here's my sermon in a sentence: We shouldn't be satisfied with the promise of peace and prosperity; we should also desire a personal relationship with God.

I think this whole passage is driving us to desire a personal relationship with God. But Exodus 33-34 doesn't use the language of personal relationship. Instead it uses the language of God's presence. Actually, the root word for presence in this passage is also translated as "face." God's presence and God's face are linked to describe what a relationship with God is like. It's a personal relationship.

It's interesting that two times in Exodus 33-34 we have extended descriptions of Moses meeting with God in his presence. At the end of chapter 34, Moses' *face* is shining on the heels of his meeting with God. And in 33:11 we're told that "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." Do you see the connection? God's presence and God's face represent a personal relationship with God.

We live in a day when there are many ways to communicate. You can communicate on your computer or your phone. You can communicate online. You can even meet people online. And face-to-face meetings are diminishing in our day. But we all know that electronic communication is a cheap substitute for the real thing! We all know that real intimacy comes face to face. And God is using this face-to-face language to describe his presence among his people.

Do you desire this kind of relationship with God? We're going to learn how to cultivate it today. It comes in Moses' dialogue with God and his intercession for the people.

Exodus 33:12-34:11

¹²Moses 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.' ¹³Now 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." ¹⁴And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶For 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?"

¹⁷And 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." ¹⁸Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." ²¹And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²²and 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. ²³Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

^{34:1}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. ²Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount

⁴ Ryken

Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. ³No 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.”⁴So 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. ⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The 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, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, 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.”⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. ⁹And 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.”

¹⁰And he said, “Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

¹¹“Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

This is the Word of the Lord.

This morning we’re going to learn three things about God’s presence or about a personal relationship with God. But these three things also include three major qualifications. So, there will be six points total.

GOD’S PLEASURE

First, **God’s presence flows from his pleasure in his people.**

As Moses begins his dialogue with God he’s indirectly asking God to go with him as he leads the people into the Promised Land. And he grounds his petition in the favor he has with God. Or the pleasure God takes in him. Look at verse 12. He says, “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 your sight.’” He’s basically saying, if you take pleasure in me, then you must go with me!⁵

But that’s not all. Moses takes things a step further. In verse 13, he also says that because *he* has God’s favor, that God needs to remember Israel: “Consider too that this nation is your people.” And that leads me to our first qualification.

God’s pleasure in us is grounded in his pleasure in our mediator. In verse 14, God says he’s willing to go with Moses. But he doesn’t say that he’ll go with Israel. Moses is not content with this. In verse 16, he says nobody will know that *he* has favor in God’s sight, he *and* the people, if God doesn’t go up with *all* of them.

Moses serves as a mediator between God and man. He has represented God to the people in communicating God’s word with them. He’s represented God to the people even in his anger over their sin. But he also represents the people to God. He does this through his intercession for them.

⁵ What follows in this main point is largely from W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology.

And he does this by establishing his solidarity with them. God's favor on *him* should result in God's favor on Israel. God's presence with *him* should include God's presence with the people.

This is a foundational truth for us. We're not Israel, but there's an analogy between Israel and the church today. In our sin, God's not very pleased with us and therefore can't dwell with us. But he is well pleased in his Son Jesus, as he said repeatedly in the New Testament (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). So, God's pleasure in us is based on our connection with our mediator, Jesus.

Jesus is the better Moses who has solidarity with his people and intercedes for them because he wants us to experience God's pleasure. Listen to how he prays in John 17: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me... I made known your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (vv. 22-23, 26).

Do you see why Jesus is the better Moses? Not only does he want us to know the favor of God that he knows. Not only does he want us to experience God's glorious presence. Jesus actually wants us to have a relationship with him that's very much like the relationship he has with the Father. And he wants us to know the love and favor of the Father like he knows it.

GOD'S GLORY

Jesus' prayer to make known God's name leads me to the second thing we learn about God's presence in Exodus 33. **God's presence is for the sake of God's glory.** In verse 16, Moses says that if God doesn't go up with them, then how will it be known that Israel has God's favor. But that's not all. How will the *nations* know that we are "distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" This is an allusion back to chapter 19:5-6, where God says, "You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Moses is reminding God of the whole point of the Exodus. That Israel would reflect something of God's holiness to the nations through entering into covenant with him. God wanted his people to glorify him. And the only way that can happen is if God's glorious presence is among them. This argument is the clincher. In verse 17, the LORD says to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do..."

This teaches us something important about prayer. Moses isn't praying simply according to his own desires. He's praying according to God's desires!

What is it that makes us distinct as Christians? Is it the fact that we go to church? The friends we spend time with? The music we listen to? The way we live our lives? The doctrine we believe? All of these things may be legitimate ways to show that we're God's people. But the fundamental distinction should be the fact that we have spent time in God's presence. Remember what they said of the disciples in Acts? "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). God's presence is what sets us apart. Are you pursuing God's presence in your life? Or maybe you're wondering how to pursue God's glorious presence in your life.

This leads me to my second qualification. How is the glory of God revealed to us? **God's glory is proclaimed as his goodness and grace.**

After Moses appeals to God's purpose for his glory to be made known, he then has the audacity in verse 18 to ask God to show him his glory. But God says that he will not reveal his glory through sight. It will be through sound. In verse 19, he says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" And that proclamation will be about his grace and his mercy.

Many today want a tangible manifestation of God. Or they want a mystical experience of God. But God in his wisdom has delighted to reveal himself to us primarily in his Word.⁶ And that makes sense, because God is a relational God. He's a personal God. And the way personal relationships are cultivated is through speech. So, when Moses asks God to show him his glory, God proclaims his word.

And that word comes to us in chapter 34, verses 6-7. "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, 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."

When Moses hears this word, he bows down and worships God (v. 8), because God's glory has been revealed through the proclamation of God's word.

I've always taken issue with the typical way people talk about the order of a worship service. You know what I'm talking about. We begin our service with worship, which means singing. Then we move on to a time of preaching.

But the whole thing is worship. Preaching shouldn't be less worshipful than singing. When we hear God's Word proclaimed, it brings us into the glorious presence of God. And should lead us to worship God. Hopefully, as we look more into God's Word today, that's what will happen with us.

I don't have time to even begin to unpack these glorious verses for you. I simply want to draw your attention to a few important aspects here as they relate to the rest of this passage and to our lives.

GOD'S PARDON

First of all, for a group of people who had just committed gross idolatry and turned their backs on God, this word of grace would be glorious music to their ears. God is merciful and gracious. And that's exactly what they need. And above all, he's abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. In other words, he's committed to his people. His love is a covenant love. He will be faithful in sickness and health, poverty and wealth, through thick and thin. His faithfulness is what leads him to forgive sin.

And that leads me to the third point about God's presence with his people: **God's presence requires his pardon of sin.**

Following God's self-revelation of his character to Moses, Moses moves on in verse 9 to ask God to pardon their iniquity and sin. Earlier, in chapter 32, Moses asked for pardon for Israel. He even offered to serve as a substitute for their sin. But God couldn't accept Moses as a substitute, as Chris said, because Moses himself was a sinner. But now that God has revealed his steadfast love, now

⁶ Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Genesis, Exodus: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*

that he has revealed his desire to forgive, Moses asks again for pardon. Only this time, he grounds his petition in God's character and covenant.⁷

Moses knows that if God goes up with a stiff-necked people, that God will wipe them out. But not if God pardons them first! God's presence requires pardon and now Moses knows where to ground his request for pardon. And God grants his request in verse 10. He says, "Behold, I am making a covenant."

But on what basis does God pardon sin? On what basis does God show grace and mercy? Does he just forgive through divine fiat? If so, how does that make sense of the last part of verse 7? God says in no uncertain terms that he will by no means clear the guilty.

Well that leads me to my third qualification. **God's pardon of sin is only possible in Jesus.** This whole passage anticipates Jesus and is fulfilled in Jesus. John 1:14-18 makes this clear. There are so many connections between John 1 and Exodus 34.⁸

In John 1:14-18 we read, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. (Or literally "a grace instead of a grace"). For the law (or the covenant) was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

The words grace and truth are a direct allusion back to Exodus 34, referring to God's steadfast love and faithfulness. The glory God revealed to Moses in a word, has now been revealed to us in *the* Word. We have a new grace, a new covenant in Christ. A grace instead of a grace. In Christ, we have fully seen God's glory.

As we continue through the Gospel of John, we come to the wedding at Cana in chapter 2, where Mary asks Jesus to do something about the shortage of wine. And Jesus responds to her, "My hour has not yet come" (v. 4). He showed his glory at Cana (v. 11), but his hour for revealing his glory in all its splendor had not yet come.

Later in chapter 12, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (v. 23). Then he goes on to talk about his death (v. 24). He says, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name" (vv. 27-28).

Do you see? The glory of God is seen supremely in Jesus Christ. His grace and truth, his steadfast love and faithfulness, are seen in the most complete way at the hour when Jesus was lifted up on a cross. On the cross he extended pardon for sinners. And at the cross the payment for the guilty was paid.

Do you want pardon for your sin? You must believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). This is the light that has been revealed to us. And Jesus is speaking to you today. "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light" (Jn. 14:36).

⁷ Blackburn

⁸ The observations that follow came from a lecture by D.A. Carson. They're also found in Blackburn.

Jesus was the presence of God with us. But through Jesus, the presence of God can continue with us through the Holy Spirit.

Not only does Jesus perfectly reflect the glory of God on the cross, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, which draws heavily on Exodus 34, we're told that "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

So through the Spirit's indwelling in us, we can fulfill the purpose for which we were created—to glorify God, to make God known.

We were saved for more than fire insurance and entrance through the pearly gates. We were saved to reflect God's glory in the earth. But that can only happen as God is present in us. That can only happen through a personal and abiding relationship with God. Do you have that? Do you want that?