

The unfolding of your words gives light.

What Makes Us Different?

Exodus 33:12-23

Introduction

In our last two studies (Exodus 25 and 28) we saw the plan of God laid out by which the Lord would meet with his high priest and symbolically take away the sin of the people. The tabernacle was set up as the place of mediation between the Lord and the people. The design for the tabernacle, its furnishings and for the garments of the high priest were specified.

While Moses was on the mountain getting these instructions the people became restless. They thought he was not coming back. They had a perception problem, thinking Moses had brought them up out of Egypt. They said (Exodus 32:1), "...as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So they asked Aaron to make them a new god.

The people had heard the Ten Commandments. Their problem was not that they did not know right from wrong. Their problem was that they thought they had a better idea. Moses' brother Aaron, the very man who was to first wear the holy high priestly garments, caved in to the fears of the people and created a syncretistic system of worship. He made a golden calf and invited the people to "a feast to the LORD" (Yahweh, using the proper name of God, 32:5).

Of course the Lord saw the whole thing. He and Moses appear to have had a disagreement over just whose people these were and just who had brought them out of Egypt. The Lord seems to have agreed with the people, saying, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves" (Exodus 32:7). Moses replied, "O LORD, why does your anger burn against your people whom You have brought from the land of Egypt with power and with a mighty hand?" (Exodus 32:11).

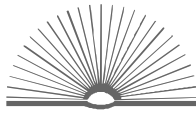
A great judgment was averted, but a great punishment ensued. Moses smashed the newly engraved copy of the Ten Commandments, destroyed the golden calf, made the people drink its dust in their water and sent the faithful from among the Levites to kill three thousand of the idolaters. Chapter 32 ends with Moses praying for the people and the Lord saying he would blot out sinners.

He said he would send an angel in his place to the Promised Land. Moses found that unacceptable.

Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But You Yourself have not let me know whom You will send with me. Moreover, You have said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people." And He said, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?"

The LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name." Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:12-23)

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Who delivered the nation from Egypt?

Certainly the words of the Lord at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12) still echo in Moses' mind, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt. You shall worship God at this mountain." So Moses said here in chapter 33, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But You Yourself have not let me know whom You will send with me." Moses did not think an angel was enough.

Who is this God?

One Jewish website poses the question we ourselves might ask after reading this portion of Scripture:

Although we have not yet completed the reading of the Book of Exodus (the second of the Five Books of Moses), one could already get the impression that the G-d of Israel is a vengeful G-d. This is the G-d who destroys the world by means of a Flood; the G-d who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son; the G-d who enslaves the Jewish people in Egypt; the G-d who kills Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons, on the greatest day of Aaron's life, at the investiture of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle; the G-d who swallows up Korach and 250 of his men as the earth opens; the G-d who decrees that the Jewish people will never be allowed to enter the Land of Israel because of the sin of the spies; the G-d who says to Moses that he will never enter the Land of Israel because he hit the rock, rather than speak to the rock. The seemingly unending anger and acts of retribution are perhaps why the nations of the world refer to the G-d of the Hebrew Scriptures, the so-called "Old Testament" G-d, as the G-d of Vengeance, while the G-d of the Christian Bible is often called the god of love or the god of mercy.^a

The text goes on to show that, from a biblical perspective, the Lord is abundantly merciful long before he executes vengeance.

Moses intercedes

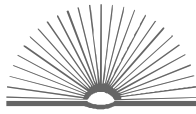
Moses appears to be complaining to the God who said words that had only been spoken of Noah: "...you have also found favor in My sight" (verse 12; compare Genesis 6:8). How does Moses get away with that? As if God did not already know, Moses points out some important information: This nation belonged to the Lord (verse 13). How could he forget his promise? God had said, "I will take you for My people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7).

Do not miss that right away (verse 14) the Lord appears to say he will give Moses what he asks, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." But in Hebrew the Lord is using the singular "you." So Moses kept arguing.

What was so special about God going with them? Wasn't it safer to keep him at a distance? Isn't it more of a pleasant existence to have less accountability? But verse 14 says that his presence would give rest. When the Lord Jesus finished denouncing another unruly group of Hebrews (Matthew 11:20-30) he also called the weary and heavy-laden to find rest in him (11:28). The key appears to be that the only way the Lord's presence was possible is through the mediation made possible by the system of tabernacle worship. God can only come near when sin is taken away. Sin is not taken away apart from the bloody, violent death of a sin-offering (merely pictured by the earthly sacrifices). Rest comes from his presence. His presence comes when sin is taken away. Compare this to the high-priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus in John 17. He is the only one who could stand the glory because that glory was his before the world was formed (John 17:5).

It is the presence of God that distinguishes his people from those who are not. No one would know this nation belonged to him if he did not show up. It's kind of like finding a penny on the sidewalk. A penny is not worth much. So you may not look around to

^a "Crash Course in Jewish Holidays: Keeteesah," National Jewish Outreach Program website, <http://www.njop.org/html/keeteesah.html>, accessed 03-08-2007.



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see who the owner is when you pick it up. You may look around to see if anyone is laughing that you take the time to pick a penny up off the sidewalk. But if you see a new laptop in a black leather bag sitting on the sidewalk, you assume when you look around that you'll either see a terrorist with a remote control or an owner frantically looking for his piece of equipment. That is the way Moses reasons with God. "Please show up for the whole nation, Lord," he says in effect.

Again the Lord says yes: "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name."

Now Moses asks for something more. "Show me your glory." It is as if Moses got the promise, but he wanted to touch it just to make sure it was real. Moses asked to see glory in verse 18 and the Lord told him to settle for his goodness. The glory was evidently a much heavier sight, which the Lord equated with his "face" (verses 20, 23). God's glory is his full weight, a vision no man can bear. The Lord gave Moses a brief glimpse of himself without letting him see what would kill him.

Moses must have understood better than ever why there had to be an ultimate sin bearer and why that sin bearer had to be of a better quality than himself or his brother Aaron—or any dead animal for that matter. The Lord's words here are used by Paul in Romans 9:15, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." Verse 12 said the same thing of Moses that was said of Noah. It is grace that brings the sinner near to God, not good choices. The question was not about the free will of man but the free will of God. God does just what he pleases.

Where Is Jesus in All This?

This section of Exodus is echoed in John 1, which shows the Lord Jesus as the one who was in the presence of God, who set up his tent among us, who revealed the glory of God and who bore sins like a lamb. This text does not call the believer to approach God flippantly, but it does call him to approach God.

Here are some reasons why you ought to crave that presence like Moses did:

1. You have been unconditionally elected. If you are saying, "I would have chosen me too, you missed something here. You do not belong at this table. This is what the statement means.
2. Your sins have been borne. You want to know what it was like to be separated from the presence of God? Jesus knew what it was to be alone. To bear the full wrath of God is to go without his presence. You may share the presence of God because he was forsaken.
3. Your adoption has been secured. You are his. In this text the personal people of God share his promises, his presence, his rest, his choice and his glory.

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