

Sermon 111, Restoring Israel's Relationship to God, Exodus 33-34

Proposition: God refuses to travel in Israel's midst, but through Moses' intercession He agrees to do so after all, and condescends to reveal His glory to Moses, renew the covenant with Israel, and even make Moses' face shine with Divine glory.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is crucial to understand the large-scale narrative arc of these chapters before looking more closely at the details. God reiterates His promise to accompany Israel in His angel, only to have Moses insist twice that Israel won't budge without Him. And so the issue of the "God to go before us" comes to a head: Is Yahweh going to accompany Israel? Moses boldly insists that God come with them, and in response God graciously reveals Himself to Moses and promises to accompany Israel. The passage is stunning in its magnitude. In it, God reveals Himself as one who acts for His people for the Mediator's sake; He shows Himself to be the God who goes with His people despite their sin; He shows Himself to be the God who keeps and renews the covenant even after His people shatter it; and He even shows Himself to be the God whose glory is contagious, making the face of His servant shine. The glory of God is writ so large in the text before us that we are only going to be able to hit the highest points in our sermon this evening. Over the next month or so I hope to discuss most of this passage in more detail. But tonight, we will see the large-scale movement of the passage, which is this: God refuses to travel in Israel's midst, but through Moses' intercession He agrees to do so after all, and condescends to reveal His glory to Moses, renew the covenant with Israel, and even make Moses' face shine with Divine glory.

I. Yahweh Tells Israel to Move On with an Angel, 33:1-3

Last time we ended by seeing that God smote the people because they made the calf which Aaron made. But that is hardly the end of the story surrounding the idolatrous worship of the aureate animal. Yahweh approaches Moses, though where and when this dialogue takes place is immaterial to the story. Yahweh comes and says something very surprising. The first part of it is only too familiar. We've heard it all before, the formulaic language about going up to the land which He promised to the patriarchs, and the six Canaanite tribes whom He will expel, and the angel who will go before Israel and clear the land for them; we even hear the standard description reminding us that it is a land flowing with milk and honey. But then comes the bombshell: "I am not going with you."

What? The angel has been around since Moses encountered Him in the burning bush back in ch. 3. He was promised in ch. 23, and Israel was told "My name is in Him." This angel is clearly Yahweh Himself, manifested as the great messenger of the covenant. And so how can God reiterate that the angel is going with them to the land flowing with milk and honey, etc., but then add "But I'm not going?"

Part of me, honestly, is reminded of the similar language in John 7: "'I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.' After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private" (vv. 8-10). God says "I'm not going up." Jesus says "I'm not going up." And then both of them go up.

We know that God and Jesus do not lie. Thus, some have suggested that the angel in Exodus 33:2 is a different angel, not "my Angel" but "an angel." The wording in the text does indeed contain this small difference. Others have suggested that actually, nothing has changed about God's plans to accompany Israel. Rather, the Almighty is just emphasizing in a new way just how offensive Israel's sin is, and how little they are ready for the presence of God.

Probably the best way to understand this passage is that the Angel has not changed, that it is still the Angel of Yahweh, the Second Person of the Trinity, who is going to accompany Israel and clear the land before them. But what has changed is that the tabernacle is canceled. God will not go up in their midst any more.

As Rashi comments, God's anger is only for a moment — but a moment is all He would need to consume Israel! And thus, though Christ will still be present with them in a spiritual way, in the pillar of cloud and fire, God's plans for actually living among them in the tabernacle are off. He will not and cannot live among such a stiffnecked people. They are likely to provoke Him to destroy them.

Now, how do we understand a threat like this from a God who knows everything? He knows that Moses will successfully mediate and restore Israel to His favor and get the tabernacle built after all. From a 4D chess perspective, let me just observe that unless God canceled the tabernacle, there would be nothing for Moses to do. How could Moses talk Him into going with the people unless there was some threat that He wouldn't go with the people? From a different

way of looking at it, hopefully orthodox as well, we can say that running through this whole passage, and through all the salvation texts of Scripture, is the tension between “forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin” and “who will by no means clear the guilty.” How can it be both? To forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin is an action awfully close to clearing the guilty. But the same God who does one will never do the other. And He juxtaposes both sides of His character in the same statement, here at the heart of our text in ch. 34 when He proclaims the name of Yahweh and also later on in Scripture, e.g., in Jeremiah 32:18: “Who showest lovingkindness to thousands, but repayest the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God. The LORD of hosts is His name.” Let me just say that the ultimate resolution of this paradox is at the cross of Christ, which is simultaneously the most savage and bloody act of justice ever committed and also the greatest and tenderest act of mercy ever shown.

So the threat stands: the angel will go with Israel, but God will not dwell in their midst in the tabernacle they’ve been given the instructions for. Their sin has driven God away; He will no longer live in their midst.

A. Israel’s Response: Repentant Mourning, vv. 4-6

Israel responds to this bad news by repentant mourning. They shed their ornaments in accordance with God’s instructions. They show, in other words, that they no longer have a desire to commit idolatry with the golden calf. They want to please the Lord and they show it by leaving their ornaments off.

B. Moses’ Response: Erecting a private tent of meeting, vv. 7-11

Moses responds in a different way. He erects a private tent of meeting. This is not the tabernacle, which has yet to be built. Rather, it is a tent where God will meet with any Israelite outside the camp. It is best compared to a place of private worship in the New Covenant economy. You can and should meet with God in public worship. But you also must meet with Him privately or your regular attendance at public worship won’t mean much. Moses goes out to this tent, and the way in which Israel stands at the doors of their tents and bows before the presence of Yahweh again shows that they are repentant. They no longer want a bull idol to go before them. They are glad to have the provision of God’s own presence in this private tent of meeting.

II. Moses Refuses to Move On without Yahweh, 33:12-17

Well, it would seem that within this tent Moses and God had yet another conversation, but this one may have been the most intense of all the times they talked together. Indeed, as we will see again next week, Moses’ request is unbelievably bold.

A. Moses Boldly Negotiates with Yahweh, vv. 12-16

God had announced that He would not be coming with Israel — most likely meaning, as I said, that He has canceled the tabernacle. His angel will still be with Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire, but He will not be living among them in a tent according to the original plan. Moses, however, finds this announcement intolerable and refuses to budge until God changes His mind. Now, again, we don’t believe that God can change His mind, because to genuinely change your mind means that you were previously mistaken and God can’t be mistaken. However, for

purposes of His condescension to us, the best way to talk about what Moses is trying to do is to say that he was trying to change God's mind. That is, he was trying to get God to reverse His cancellation of the tabernacle project.

1. Moses Appeals Based on his Favored Status, vv. 12-13

How did Moses do this? And what can we learn from him about Jesus, our true Mediator? We will talk at greater length about both of these questions in the coming weeks, of course. But today I want you to see that Moses appeals to God based on his own favored status. His appeal this time is not to the promises to the patriarchs, perhaps because God already said in v. 1 that the promises to the patriarchs were still in force and quite compatible with His decision to cancel the tabernacle. And so Moses appeals based on God's own intimacy with him. "Because you know me by name and I have found favor in your sight" are the two negotiating levers that he uses to move God.

This is fantastic. This is amazing. Moses' appeal to God is based on Moses' favored status! He is asking God to show favor to Israel because God loves Moses.

Could there be a better illustration of how Jesus Christ mediates on our behalf? He too asks His Father to show favor to us, not based on any characteristics that we possess, but solely on the basis of His own faithfulness and intimacy with God.

Moses also appeals with the reminder that Israel is God's people. And thus, it is based not only on the Mediator's personal charisma and relationship with God, but also on God's sworn promise to take Israel as His people.

God responds to this appeal by saying essentially "You're right, Moses. I do favor you. And so I am going to go with you and give you rest." But those "yous" are singular. Moses' favored status ensures that God will take care of him. The people are not part of that equation.

2. Moses Rejects any Divine Presence that Excludes the People, vv. 15-16

Moses dares to keep arguing with Almighty God. He argues that there is no point at all in going to the promised land if God does not go with them. For God to keep the letter of His land promise, but fail to make Israel His own people with whom He dwells, would be a disaster. It would become the subject of memes and satirical mockery among the nations. Moses appeals to the distinctiveness of Israel and to God's commitment to the nations at large. God's failure to openly take Israel as His own would lead to the nations not knowing that God loves Israel. That would be awful.

God is not God of Jews only, but of Gentiles also. His divine presence needs to go with His people so that it will be evident to the whole world that they are His people. Different diets, clothing, worship, etc. are not sufficient to set Israel apart. The only identity marker worth fighting for is the presence of God with His people.

Do you believe that? Are you willing to give up your identity as American so you can keep your identity as Christian?

B. Yahweh Consents to Accompany the People, v. 17

Well, this argument prevails with Yahweh. He consents to accompany the people. The issue of the "god to go before us" has found a preliminary solution.

But that issue was not just about a God to go before Israel. Fundamentally, Israel wanted a deity they could see. Moses, too, uses the word “see” over and over, seven times in a row in this next paragraph.

III. A God Whose Grace we can See, 33:18-34:35

The God to go before Israel was willing to show Himself. He could not be contained in bull form like the golden calf. But He was willing to show Himself to Moses in some real way.

A. The Sight of God, 33:18-34:9

This section is utterly climactic and glorious. When the seventy elders saw the God of Israel along with Moses and Aaron, they saw the pavement in front of His throne. But now, Moses genuinely sees God.

1. Moses Asks to See God’s Glory, v. 18

He is not content merely with speaking to God. He’s been speaking to God for the past seven weeks on the mountaintop and now down in the tent of meeting.

Have you ever had a phone friend? Were you a bit nervous about actually seeing this friend for the first time? Well, imagine how nervous Moses was to make this request, particularly when God’s immediate answer is “No man can see my face and live”! But nonetheless, Moses makes the request and then falls silent. He does not speak again until after Yahweh has passed by.

2. Yahweh Shows Moses His Back, 33:19-34:9

God shows His back to Moses. We are going to talk about this at length. Suffice it to say that the metaphor is clear enough. Seeing someone’s back is not the same as seeing his face. Yet even God’s back is overwhelming enough to nearly kill the one who looks at it. Furthermore, this visible revelation is supplemented, indeed, overshadowed by the verbal revelation that accompanies it. The Thirteen Attributes by which God describes Himself are as glorious as any visible display that He could have shown to Moses.

B. The Way of God

But He doesn’t leave it at that.

1. Moses Reiterates the Request that Yahweh Accompany the People, 34:10

While he has God’s attention, Moses reiterates the request that Yahweh accompany them in the tabernacle.

2. Yahweh Responds by Reiterating the Covenant Terms, vv. 11-27

Yahweh responds by reiterating the covenant terms, giving a summary of the book of the covenant, as if to say “Everything from before is back on. I will do what I promised.”

C. The Glory of God, vv. 28-35

Our passage concludes with Moses himself shining with the glory of God. The visible glory will indeed go before Israel, not in a golden calf, but in a radiant man who is too bright to look upon. How glorious! How marvelous! God is with His people through His faithfulness to His covenant and His commitment to the Mediator. Believe Him. Trust Him. He is a God to go before you

through the wilderness of this world and to bring you safely out the other side to His heavenly kingdom. Amen.