

Exodus 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 33 For you are a stiff-necked people When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.
- For the Lord had said to Moses, Say to the people of Israel, You are a stiff-necked people. If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.
- Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mount Horeb onward. Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting.
- And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent.
- When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.
- [1 : 3 7] Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.
- Moses said to the Lord, See, you said 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 favour in my sight.
- Now therefore, if I have found favour in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.
- And he said, My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. And he said to him, If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour 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? And the Lord said to Moses, This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.
- [2 : 4 8] Moses said, Please show me your glory. And 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. But, he said, You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.
- And the Lord said, Behold there is a place by me, where you shall stand on the rock, and 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.
- Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen. Exodus chapter 33 comes at an extreme crisis point in the narrative.

Israel has sinned with the golden calf, and Moses has dissuaded God from destroying them, by, in part, enacting wrath against Israel on the Lord's behalf. Then he has asked for forgiveness, insisting that if God is going to blot out the Israelites, he must be blotted out too.

- [3 : 51] This is an extremely daring and risky move. God responded by saying that he would send his angel before them, and that his presence would not accompany them. And when he did visit them, he would visit their sin upon them.

The bond between God and his people seems to be severed. So God is going to fulfil his promise, he's going to send an angel before them, but ahead of them, not in their midst.

God is not going to associate with them. If God comes near to them, they will be destroyed by him. God refers to them also as the people, not his people anymore. And this is underlined again at the beginning of chapter 33.

They are the people that Moses has brought out of Egypt. God is practically disowning them. God won't go with them, lest he destroy them or consume them. He will bring them to the place, he said, but he's no longer going to do so as their God.

And the part played by Moses in this story is incredibly important. Moses is the intercessor, the intermediary, the one who interacts with God on behalf of the people on the basis of God's character, purposes and covenant.

- [4 : 57] And it's reminiscent in some ways of Abraham in his intercession for Sodom, but it goes even further. God says that in the day that he visits the people, he will visit their sin upon them. And this is followed by a plague being sent upon the people because they made the calf.

There's something about that particular passage that should remind us of something that we heard just a couple of chapters earlier concerning the census tax. God says, And the word for plague here is the same.

Likewise, the word for numbering the people or counting the people is the same for God visiting the people at the end of chapter 32. And there seems to be a connection. And I think it helps us to understand the logic of that particular law concerning the census.

The logic being that when that person is being counted, they are being brought into sight. They're being brought into God's attention as a distinct person, not just a member of the mass, but they're being brought to God's mind.

And as a result of that, atonement must be made for them, lest in counting them up, God visit their sin upon them. We might think of it in part as, as the people are being reckoned up, the numbers of them, there is also a reckoning that occurs.

- [6 : 20] And if they're not prepared for that, God will visit them with a plague. And this is what happens at the end of chapter 32. As people are being reckoned up and counted, God takes personal note of them and God will judge those who do not have atonement made for them.

And the challenge that Moses has at this point is that of rehabilitating the broken relationship between God and his people. It's dangerous for God to be near such a sinful people because his holy presence threatens to destroy them.

But we should notice that there is some softening of the tone in the statement at the beginning of chapter 33. And also note the way that Moses is associated with the people. He has thrown in his lot with them.

God speaks of them as you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt. So Moses and Moses' people, he is associated with them. He has thrown in his lot with them and they will go to the land.

But God is not going to go with them. Nevertheless, whereas in the previous statement that the Lord made, he spoke about the place about which I have spoken to you, even distancing himself, as it were, from the land of Canaan, here he declares the nature of the land of Canaan in a way that reminds you of the promises that have been made earlier.

[7 : 32] So maybe there's a softening that we can hear here. Also, while that earlier speech ends on a threatening note, nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.

This speech ends slightly differently, with a statement that suggests that God would go with them if he could, but he can't because he would destroy them if he went with them. And so it's for the sake of the people, in part, that he is not going with them.

All of this should be seen against the backdrop of all that Sinai means. God has come close to his people. He wants to be among his people, with his people. He wants to be their God and for them to be his people.

It's a marriage ceremony. And now the people have rejected him. They've forsaken him and directly broken that command that was given to them at the beginning. This is a fall event. So we've seen all the ways in which the seven-day pattern is playing out in chapters 25 to 31.

And then there is a fall. And at this point, there's a sort of expulsion. This is being thrown out of the Garden of Eden. But they've broken the primary commandments, the ways that God told them to worship him, to not have gold and silver idols before him.

[8 : 38] The action with the golden calf is an action of spiritual adultery. It's as if the newly married man arrives back to his house to find his wife in bed with another man.

The betrayal is severe. And the anger of the Lord should be seen against the background of this. It's not just that God is a holy God wanting pure justice. It's that God loves his people, has taken them to himself.

God wants to be near to his people. And his people, even after being taken out of Egypt, even after having God come close to them, even after God having led them through the wilderness and protected them and provided for them, they still turn their back on him.

They still go after other gods just as they've been told not to. The response of the people at this point, though, is encouraging. The people had taken off their jewellery to form the golden calf, but now they take it off in mourning for the Lord from whom they have been separated.

And there's a contrast between these two things and a connection as well. This is a reversal of what they did earlier. And the people are mourning the right thing. They are still going to be led into the land, God says, but God is not going to go with them.

[9 : 45] And that is what they're mourning. They're mourning the fact that they have lost the relationship that they could have enjoyed with the Lord. The golden calf had been a way to avoid having to deal with the living God, a blast shield that they could shield behind and not have to relate to God.

But now they see what they have lost. They have lost the relationship with the living God and they mourn at that point. Moses has to pitch the tent of meeting outside of the camp.

This isn't the tabernacle, although the tabernacle is elsewhere called the tent of meeting because it functions in the same way. It rather becomes the tent of meeting when it's created. But this is the place where he meets with the Lord and he intermediates between the Lord and the people.

The Lord speaks to Moses and a man speaks to his friend. But Moses has to step away from the people in order to relate to the Lord. So Moses has thrown his lot in with the people, but he also can relate to the Lord and he does so by stepping away from the people and going to a place where the people are at a safe distance.

The Lord told Moses to bring up the people, but never let him know whom he would send with him. And this is the key point that Moses presses here. Is God going to go with them in their midst?

[11 : 02] Or is he just going to send an angel before them at some distance ahead of them and prepare the way for them, but not have any dealings with them? The Lord had expressed his special regard for Moses, knowing him by name.

And Moses asked to be shown the Lord's ways as evidence that he, Moses, has indeed found favour in God's sight. He's asking for some sort of reciprocation that he too might know the Lord by name so that he might find favour in his sight in the future.

He asks the Lord then to consider that the people are his. Lord, you asked me to bring these people up. These are your people. You commissioned me with this particular task.

This people is your own people. You cannot disown them at this point. The theme of knowledge is very important in Moses' speech. The Lord had not made known to Moses whom he would send with him, but he had known Moses by name and now he wanted to know the Lord so that he might have favour in his sight in the future.

And then he also wanted it to be known that he had found favour in his sight. To understand Moses' intercession within this passage and the passage that proceeds, it's important to see the way that Moses is using every bit of leverage that he has.

[12 : 21] His relationship with the Lord, the way that God has known him especially, the way that God has shown grace to him, the way that God has called him and commissioned him. And every single bit of that he uses as leverage for the sake of the people so that God would forgive them, that God would restore them and that God would go up in their midst, that God would identify with them again, that they would be his people.

Note the way that at the end, he adds in something. Where we might expect Moses to say, for how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight? And for it to end there, it actually concludes with the statement, I and your people.

It's not just Moses. He wants to include the people. He has thrown in his lot with the people and he wants God to recognise the people, that the people will be blessed with him on account of his relationship with God, that they too would be blessed and that they would be restored in relationship with God, that God once more would identify with them and go up in their midst.

Indeed, it's in God's presence with them that they are a distinct people. If God is not present with them, they're just like any other people on the planet. It's the fact that God is with them, that they are his people, that makes them different.

The divine presence is absolutely crucial. If God does not lead the people personally and with his presence in their midst, then what's the point? That's the evidence that they are the Lord's people.

[13 : 45] The chapter ends with God promising Moses an epiphany, a revelation of his glory, that Moses will see who God is and that in seeing this, something of the knowledge imbalance will be resolved, that Moses will know the Lord in some way as God has known him, that God has known him in a very intimate and special way and now he will know the Lord and that that knowledge will help him going forward to have favour in the sight of the Lord.

We should be observing the continued allusions to the story of Noah within this particular account. We've seen them from the very beginning of the story at Sinai, the seven days, the seven days, the 40 days and then the ascending up the mountain, the way in which the Ark of the Covenant is described in a similar way to Noah's Ark and now we've seen a number of examples with God telling Moses that he would cut off the people and start a new people with Moses.

That's similar to the story of Noah. In this chapter, it continues. Moses finds favour in the sight of the Lord, just as Noah did in Genesis chapter 6. We can also think of God's statement about giving them rest.

That's another statement that reminds us of Noah. And so Noah is in the background here. Moses is playing the part of a Noah, but a Noah who intercedes and restores the people that God is about to destroy.

He's not a Noah that goes into the Ark. He's a Noah that stands and reasons with God and intercedes for a people that God is about to judge. The epiphany that follows is mysterious and we'll discuss it in much more depth when we talk about chapter 34.

[15 : 22] But there are things to be noted. For instance, Moses talks to the Lord as a man speaks to his friend face to face. However, only a few verses later, we're told that no one can see the face of the Lord and live.

What we need to recognise is that when we're using language about God, it's used in analogical ways. It is important to recognise that such language is accommodated to us.

It's not something that should be taken literally in a way that would set up a contradiction between these two statements. Rather, such language of God is analogical. It's limited.

It takes us a certain distance, but only so far. And it needs to be held in check by those things we know about God, those statements that show the ways in which God cannot be contained by his creation, that God is beyond his creation, exceeds its categories, and is not limited by those things.

So when we read statements that God spoke to Moses as a man speaks to his friend face to face, we need to see, in some sense, God does speak to Moses face to face. But in another sense, Moses does not see the face of the Lord, as we see later on in that chapter.

[16 : 28] And both of those statements need to be held together. Neither one should be allowed to remove or evacuate the content of the other. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which Moses, in this chapter and the chapter that precedes it, presents us with a type of Christ in his intercession for us and in his work in atonement?