

'Show me your glory', Exod. 33. 18. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 14 May 2008.

Our Bible text for this morning comes from the book of Exodus, chapter 33, verse 18, in which Moses asked the Lord, 'Show me your glory'.

This particular request of Moses comes towards the end of a lengthy section in which Moses records his intercession before God following the tragic incident of the molten – or golden – calf.

During the absence of Moses up Mount Sinai, an absence of almost six weeks, the Israelites had grown impatient. They wanted to move on, but, as they saw it, they had neither Moses nor any 'god' to lead them.

Before Moses had left them to go up into the mountain, he had told them to consult his brother Aaron¹ if any issues came up which needed urgent decision or action.²

So the people had approached Aaron with the demand that he give them some visible and tangible symbol of God's presence: 'Rise up', they had said, 'make us a god³ who will go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what is become of him!'

Feebly – and foolishly – Aaron had complied with their request, and had melted down the golden earrings which the people had brought with them from Egypt.⁴ When the heated gold was pliable enough, Aaron had shaped it into the image of a bull-calf⁵ – in all likelihood patterned on one of the gods of Egypt with which they had been familiar⁶ and which they had once worshipped there.⁷ The next day the people had begun to worship the golden calf and to offer sacrifices to it.⁸

The Lord had then informed Moses of all that had taken place at the foot of the mountain, and, initially, testing the strength of Moses' love for the people, God had spoken in terms of annihilating the whole nation and of making another (another nation, that is) from his (from Moses') descendants.⁹

This had led to four prayers of Moses in which he had interceded for Israel.¹⁰ In summary, he had pleaded (i) that they were the Lord's own people, whom He had recently redeemed from Egypt,¹¹ (ii) that the Egyptians would undoubtedly gloat over Israel's destruction,¹² and (iii) that God had undertaken to bless and multiply the nation and take them through safely to the Promised Land.¹³ Moses had also entreated God to forgive Israel, going so far as to ask God to put an end to his own life if that forgiveness wasn't granted.¹⁴

God had agreed not to destroy the people, but had told Moses that He was no longer willing to accompany them personally through their future wanderings and that He would simply grant them the guidance and services of an angel.¹⁵ In response, Moses had made it clear that, unless the Lord would promise *His own* presence, not to Moses only but to the whole nation, he (Moses) had no wish to move forward.¹⁶ Nothing short of such a promise would satisfy Moses. And indeed such a promise he obtained, for, immediately before our text this morning, we read that 'the Lord said to Moses, I will do as you have said'.¹⁷

And now, having asked so much for his people – and, having by his tenacious pleading successfully restored the people to God's favour – Moses asked just one favour for himself.

But *what* a favour! 'Show me your glory'. C. H. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, ventured the opinion, 'It is the greatest petition that man ever asked of God'.

And God's response? 'I will make all my goodness *pass before you*, and will *proclaim* before you my name', He said, 'but you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live ... Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon 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'.¹⁸

And the sequel? 'The Lord', we read in the opening section of the following chapter, '*passed before him*, and *proclaimed*, The Lord ... a merciful and gracious God (a compassionate God, who bestows His favour freely, that is), slow to anger,¹⁹ and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty'.²⁰

So no, Moses wasn't able to see the unveiled glory of God's face²¹ – only His backparts. But, although the Lord shielded Moses from glimpsing any more than 'the afterglow' of His glory, He did let him see as much as any man could ever see of His glory and radiance – and even this limited sight, we read later, had the effect of causing the skin of Moses' face to shine to such an extent that he needed to cover his face whenever he spoke to the people.²²

No, Moses wasn't permitted to see the unveiled glory of God's face. But, in a sense, what he *heard* made up for what he could not see. For the Lord gave to Moses a tremendous revelation of Himself.²³ And what God described was not, as we might have expected, *His appearance*, but *His nature* – not *how He looked* but *what He was* –

revealing, if you like, not *the glory of His appearance* but *the glory of His character* – revealing Himself as compassionate and gracious, wondrously patient and ready to forgive.

And yet – and yet – in one sense, there was a sting in the tail. For God revealed Himself also as One who ‘will by no means clear (by no means acquit) the guilty’. Thereby making it clear that he does not forgive sins by ignoring them, or overlooking them – by sweeping them under some celestial carpet. Far from it. Make no mistake, He takes sin very seriously, and His own justice demands that sin be punished.

But how could this circle be squared – how could those who are unquestionably guilty ever be forgiven? To answer that question fully we will need – with Moses – to jump forward some 1,500 years – to another mountain. Has Moses prayed to see God's glory and been told that this will not be possible? Well, in one sense, Moses did have his prayer answered a millennium and a half later. For, in his gospel, Luke tells of an occasion when Moses, along with the prophet Elijah, appeared briefly on what we call ‘the Mount of the Transfiguration’, where they, together with the disciples Peter, James and John, saw the glory of our Lord Jesus.

And on that Mount, Luke adds, they – Moses and Elijah – spoke with the Lord Jesus about His forthcoming death at Jerusalem. And it is that death which holds the key to the problem of how God can forgive the guilty – forgive the sinner – without in any way compromising His justice. For (by faith in the Lord Jesus) we can experience God's mercy, grace and forgiveness, because – but only because – He (the Lord Jesus) has borne the full judgement due to our sins.

In his weighty ‘Systematic Theology’, A. H. Strong quotes the following story, ‘A prisoner in Scotland was brought before the Judge. As the culprit entered the box, he looked into the face of the Judge to see if he could discover any mercy there. The Judge and the prisoner exchanged glances, and then there came a mutual recognition. The prisoner said to himself: “It is all right this time”, for the Judge had been his classmate in Edinburgh University twenty-five years before. When sentence was pronounced, it was (a very large fine), the limit of the law for the misdemeanour charged, and the culprit was sorely disappointed as he was led away But the Judge went at once and himself paid the fine, telling the clerk to write the man's discharge. This the Judge delivered in person, explaining that the demands of the law must be met, but having been met, the man was now free’.²⁴

And so it is with me. I go free because another – my Lord Jesus – has paid in full the price of my forgiveness.

I read how God protected Moses from the blaze of His glory by sheltering him (I quote) ‘in a cleft of a rock’. Perhaps that expression reminds you – as it does me – of the words of an old, but well-known, hymn – which spells out the only way in which any sinner – like me – can be saved ...

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee ...

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

(Augustus Toplady)

Endnotes

¹ And/or Hur.

² Exod. 24. 14.

³ For the translation 'god', as opposed to 'gods', see Darby's New Translation. And compare Exod. 32. 4, 8 with Neh. 9. 18.

⁴ See Exod. 12. 35-36 for the likely origin of the earrings – as of the 'ornaments', Exod. 33. 5-6.

⁵ 'Probably around a carved wooden figure', The IVP Bible Background Commentary. 'Probably a wooden figure laminated with gold, a process which is known to have existed in Egypt', Smith's Bible Dictionary.

⁶ Apis or Horus.

⁷ Joshua 24. 14; Ezek. 20. 8.

⁸ It is possible that, in part at least, his 'breaking' of the tablets of the law, Exod. 32. 19, was a symbolic gesture witnessing to the way that in practise Israel had already done just that – broken God's law. (Although the Hebrew word used does differ from that used of transgressing the law.)

⁹ Exod. 32. 10.

¹⁰ Exod. 32. 11-13; 31-32; 33. 12-13; 15. Compare Exod. 34. 9 for Moses' one later prayer of intercession on that occasion.

¹¹ Exod. 32. 11.

¹² Exod. 32. 12.

¹³ Exod. 32. 13.

¹⁴ Exod. 34. 31-32.

¹⁵ Exod. 32. 34; 33. 2-3.

¹⁶ Exod. 33. 12-17. Note that, when God promised, 'My presence will go with you (singular)', Exod. 33. 14, Moses persisted with his plea that this promise should extend to and include the rest of the people. Hence, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry **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 distinguished, I and **your people**, from all other people that are upon the face of the earth?', Exod. 33. 15-16 literally. The earlier pitching of 'the tent of meeting' 'outside' (and, indeed, 'far from') the camp, Exod. 33. 7, served as an acted parable of Israel's predicament – as having forfeit God's presence. (Compare Dale Ralph Davis in WTJ—V44 #1;71-87—Spr 1982—71ff.)

¹⁷ Exod. 33. 17.

¹⁸ Exod. 33. 19-23.

¹⁹ As if God takes a long, deep breath before dealing with the sinner.

²⁰ Exod. 34. 6-7.

²¹ See John 1. 18; 1 Tim. 6. 16; 1 John 4. 12.

²² Exod. 34. 33-35.

²³ This revelation of the character of God is echoed on at least 13 later occasions in the Old Testament, spanning the law, the psalms and the prophets. See Num. 14. 18; 2 Chron. 30. 9; Neh. 9. 17; Psa. 86. 5, 15; 103. 8; 111. 4; 112. 4; 116. 5; 145. 8; Joel 2. 13; Jonah 4. 2; Nahum 1. 3.

²⁴ A. H. Strong's 'Systematic Theology', pages 767-768.