

Amazing Truths of the Pentateuch (14)
Now Show Me Your Glory
Exodus 33:1-34:7

Introduction:-

In the ancient world, there are many stories about the activity of the gods in human affairs. But what remained unique for Israel is that they heard the voice of God speaking from out of the fire at Mount Sinai, and yet lived. In this sense, the covenant at Mount Sinai was historically unique. Further, as Deuteronomy 4:32-40 reminds us, no other god has ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, signs and wonders, and awesome power, such as Israel experienced by the hand of the Lord in Egypt. Finally, Israel was shown all these things, that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other. And the divine motivation for all of this was God's "love" for his people Israel, and faithfulness to the covenant that He made with them. And so the distinctive mark about Israel's faith, unparalleled in ancient religions, is the belief that God revealed his loving character in his actions, with a moral purpose governing all that he did. Most religions prescribed some form of moral code for their worshippers, but the gods were often thought of as exempt from that code. In the popular stories of the Greek and Roman gods, the gods are represented as behaving in ways that would be immediately condemned in their followers. But for Israel, the Lord finally revealed his own glory, as well as His excellent and peerless character, in order that His followers might discover who the Lord really is, and how He might be experienced and followed. Let us now pick up the movement of this remarkable passage, and its blessing for us today.

1. First, things get off to a Bad Start (Exodus 33:1-6)

Although the command is given to proceed to the Promised Land, it is evident that a major problem remains unresolved. And even though an angel would go before Israel in order to drive out the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, the Lord Himself would not go with His people, because they proved to be a "stiff-necked" people in the previous sin of the making of the golden calf. In fact, they could even be destroyed on the way, if the Lord were to travel with them. The command was then given to take off their ornaments, of the kind used in the making of the golden calf, which may be a visible sign of the peoples' repentance at this point. Also at this point, the construction of the Tabernacle was also suspended, for the purpose of the Tabernacle was so that the Lord might dwell in the midst of His people as He travelled with them to the Promised Land (Exodus 25:8; 29:44-46). Likewise, this raises the question for us, of how we can be sure that the Lord is with us today, and what unnecessary baggage do we need to get rid of, that hinders rather than helps, in order that we might run well the race that is set before us? (Hebrews 12:1-3).

2. Secondly, the Tent of Meeting speaks of Hope (Exodus 33:-7-11)

The place of the Tent of Meeting here is not just about a piece of information relating to a recurring event as with the NIV, but it forms a contextual link with the passage that follows. When things begin to look bad, the only answer is a retreat into the presence of God, and waiting upon Him (cf. Psalm 73:16-17 = "When I tried to understand all of this (the ways of the wicked), it was oppressive to me, until I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny"). Certainly this could be applied to what is going on here. Moses himself had first learned this lesson with his

seven ascents to the top of Sinai when first receiving the Covenant Law (Exodus 19-24). And now, before the construction of the Tabernacle, a temporary arrangement was used by Moses whereby people could go to this "tent of meeting" outside the camp, in order to inquire of the Lord. The pillar of cloud at the entrance to the tent was a sign that God was communicating with Moses within the tent, whilst the people stood and worshiped at the entrance to their tents. Thus there is still hope for Israel, despite the present crisis, whilst Israel has such a mediator before God. This is precisely what Job longed for in the book of Job (9:33-35; 16:18-21; 19:25-27). This will now lead into the theme of the presence and glory of God in the following verses, as well as pick up where verses 1-6 left off, relating to the absence of God in Israel's midst.

3. Thirdly, the problem of the Presence of God is solved (Exodus 33:12-17)

In these verses Moses was deeply concerned about God's presence going with His people. He appears to be not content with the earlier assurances that the Lord's angel would still go before Israel, although the Lord's angel was really a manifestation of Yahweh Himself. Perhaps Moses was looking for the name of the person who would go with Him. This concern for the name of God was first flagged by Moses at the Burning Bush involving the angel of the Lord at Exodus 3:1-15. And now, something similar to that is possibly repeating itself here. Moses' most important statement is then found in verse 15: "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here", which is either meant to elicit a prompt and further reassuring response from the Lord, or it may be a way of consolidating the Lord's positive response already given in verse 14: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." The passage is framed in verses 12 and 17 by the words, "I know you by name, and I am pleased with you", therefore I will do the thing you have asked. We too can have that same assurance today. Finally, Moses in verse 13 says: "If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know you, and continue to find favour with you." These words are quite remarkable, coming from Moses of all people, and must have come as sweet music to God's ears. As Moses will soon discover, true knowledge of God depends on His self-revelation. Which now leads us to the final amazing section of our passage.

4. Finally, the passage concludes with Moses' request to see the Glory of God (Exodus 33:18-4:7)

One would think that Moses would be satisfied with God's reply in verse 17. A practical kind of spirituality. But then Moses says: "Show me your glory" (v. 18). This request may be seen as a continuation of Moses' earlier statement in verse 13 asking the Lord to teach Moses His ways, in order that Moses might know God better. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word we translate "glory" means "presence, weight, or substance." In the ancient world, this often related to individuals of substance and acclaim. And so here, the glory of God means the very essence of God Himself. This would have also been understood as a synonym for the face of God. God's reply to Moses in verse 20 may well suggest that this is what Moses was really reaching out for, as an advance on all that he experienced of God's presence up until this point. The glory of God had previously been associated with the pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 24:15-18), and in Exodus 33:7-11 with the Lord speaking with Moses face to face. Was Moses requesting a repeat of an earlier experience along these lines? Perhaps Moses was now seeking to put a human face to this speaking God. The Lord's answer was that such an encounter would not be possible, for no one could see God's

face and live. However, the Lord would cause all his "goodness" (or character) to pass before Moses, together with a proclamation of His name, the Lord. Also in the context of Israel's rebellion, the Lord reserves the right to be merciful and compassionate on whomever He chooses, and when He chooses (cf. Romans 9:15). Further, Moses would experience the back of God and not His face, as well as hear the self-revelation of God's character proclaimed at Exodus 34:6-7, in connection with His name, the Lord. This is one of the most amazing and important statements made in the entire Bible, and helps us to understand fully who God is, and how He responds to humankind. His character is one of compassion, grace, love, and mercy, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet His forgiveness is never at the expense of His justice, in terms of dealing with sin. Truly a just, upright, and holy God!! (Deuteronomy 32:3-4). And because God is precisely this kind of God, from eternity itself, He has truly planned wonderful things beyond our wildest dreams, for those who claim Him as their Lord (1 Corinthians 2:9). Ultimately it was God's love which planned our redemption in Christ from eternity, in order that we might one day receive an unfading inheritance kept in Heaven for us (1 Peter 1:4). And from that vantage point, we will also see his face!! (Revelation 22:3-4).

Conclusion:-

In spite of all the promises made to him, Moses' greatest desire was to see the glory of God. And even though this request was not entirely answered as Moses would have liked, it was still honoured and answered in God's own way. And it will always be answered for us as well. But what God finally wanted Moses to experience in all its grandeur and fullness, was the self-revelation of His goodness, connected to His name, and character. Finally in the New Testament, Paul could say: "For God, who said let light shine out of darkness, made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). In a sense, Moses' prayer was finally answered on the Mount of Transfiguration, at Luke 9:30-32, where together with Elijah and three of the disciples, he shared a vision of the Lord's face and glory. Further, as John puts it, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us, and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The character of God was finally and fully revealed in the coming of Jesus Christ!! Let us rejoice in this wonderful truth today as we celebrate the season of our Saviour's coming into this world!!

Amen.