

Glory and Grace

Exodus 33:17–34:35

Passion for God is easily confused with passion for what God gives us. It's easy to confuse, because God often gives us very good things—life, breath, family, friends, work, money, shelter, food—to name a few earthly goods. And more than that, spiritually good things, like forgiveness, new life, adoption into his family, the presence of his Spirit, the promise of heaven. It's easy to confuse our passion for those good things with passion for God himself. But it's the difference between being excited about a gift, and being excited about the one who gave it to you.

Perhaps more than any other passage in this book, our story this morning shows us that as good as our salvation is—Israel's salvation from slavery in Egypt, our salvation from sin and death—as good and life-giving and freeing and joyful as it is—our salvation is a gift designed to fuel our passion for the Giver. In other words, salvation is not the end of the Christian life, but *a means to an end*. The *end* is beholding the glory of God.

We see this in the conversation before us between Moses and the LORD. Now we're actually jumping into the middle of a conversation that began in our passage last week, which Navin walked us through. If you've been with us through this series, or have read Exodus before, you'll remember how after rescuing Israel from Egypt and bringing them to Mount Sinai in the wilderness, the LORD made a covenant with them—to be their God, and they will be his special people. He gave them his law as stipulations of that covenant, and then invited Moses into his presence on Sinai to give him instructions for building a tabernacle, so that he could dwell with his covenant people as they made their way through the wilderness toward the land of Canaan. But while Moses was up on the mountain, the people of Israel got scared and impatient, and decided to take matters into their own hands. They asked Aaron, Moses' brother whom he had left in charge, to make an image of Yahweh, a golden calf, so that they could keep tabs on God and know if he was in their midst. And the people worship this graven image—a brazen rebellion against the law God just gave them a few days earlier.

Israel breaks the terms of the covenant. Which Moses symbolizes when he comes down from the mountain and breaks the tablets of the covenant. It's as if to say, the deal is off. When you make a business deal, or sign a contract to buy a house or something, there are terms or stipulations to that contract. You're going to put this much money in escrow, the seller is going to repair these things on the house before closing. And if you fail to do those things, if you break those terms, the contract can be voided. The deal is off.

Israel breaks the terms of their covenant with God, and at the end of ch. 32 it looks like the deal is off. God saved his people that he might be their God and dwell in their midst; now all of that is

off the table. God is no longer going to go with his people into Canaan. He'll keep his promise to Moses and send them there, but no law, no tabernacle, no covenant, no God.

This is what Moses intercedes to restore in ch. 33. And as Navin walked us through that story last week, we saw how Moses' intercession was successful. God restores his presence and promises to go with his people (33:14), reminding us that the greatest blessing we have is God himself, and the greatest enjoyments that we can have of him is an assurance of his presence, his nearness, his concern, and his favor.

As we pick up the conversation now in ch. 33:17, God affirms once again that Moses has found favor in God's sight, and that he will do all that he has spoken to him. And you would think that upon hearing that, that after such incredible success in interceding for Israel, appealing to God to remain with his people and renew his covenant, that Moses would have immediately charged down the mountain to tell Israel the good news and celebrate with them. The deal is back on the table. Salvation has been restored. Literally, the greatest potential disaster in Israel's entire history—to be forsaken by God and no longer be his special covenant people—has just been avoided. Mission accomplished, right?

But Moses doesn't charge down the mountain. He doesn't just get back to work leading the people into the Promised Land. Instead, he lingers. The conversation continues. But now he transitions from interceding on behalf of Israel to making a rather personal request for himself. A bold request: "show me your glory" (33:18).

What a strange request. What is Moses asking anyway?

Christians often talk about the glory of God. We give him glory; we pray that God would be glorified during our service; we want to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor. 11:30). But what are we talking about when we talk about the glory of God?

The most helpful definition I've found is *God's worthy reputation*. It's all that's good and praiseworthy about him. As God himself replies to Moses' request, "I will make all my *goodness* pass before you" (33:19)—all that is good and praiseworthy and glorious about God. It's not that different from how we use the word in other contexts. When you talk about the glory of the Red Sox, or the glory of Boston, or the glory of your school, or your team, or your choir, or whatever—what are you talking about? All that is praiseworthy and good about them. What makes them stand out as unique, as worthy of honor and attention. So the glory of God is all that is praiseworthy about him. And to give glory to God is to acknowledge and express and magnify his reputation, to ascribe to him the glory he deserves.

So Moses wants to see God's glory—his beauty and radiance and power. But what's most striking about his request *here* is what it teaches us about the goal of salvation—to behold the glory of God. To be more passionate about God himself than the good things he gives us.

Again, that distinction can be hard to see. But it's the difference on Christmas morning, when you unwrap a present and find the gift of your dreams inside, between grabbing that gift and immediately running off to play with it, versus running immediately to your parents who gave it to you and throwing your arms around them in gratitude and love. One delights in the gift, the other sees that the goodness of the gift is but a reflection of the goodness of the giver.

Israel received a gift from God on that mountain—forgiveness, peace, rest, the renewed promise of God’s presence. But upon receiving that gift, Moses doesn’t run off to play with it, or celebrate it, or Instagram it. He turns his attention to the giver, to God. Because *God is the real prize*, the real treasure. Not what he does for Israel or for us, but God himself. Salvation is not the end; it’s the means to the end of beholding the glory of God. That’s what Moses wants to see. God in all his goodness and beauty and greatness. It’s a bold request.

And God, somewhat surprisingly, responds positively to his request. He says, Yes, I will show you my glory. But in his response, four things come into focus in understanding and beholding the glory of God. And I want us to see each of these as we seek to join Moses in beholding God’s glory this morning.

God Reveals his Glory by his Grace

First, *God reveals his glory by his grace*. God doesn’t owe a positive answer to Moses. It’s only because Moses has found favor in God’s sight (v. 17), that he is bold enough to ask, and God is kind enough to answer. And when you realize that the Hebrew word translated “favor” here is the word for “grace,” that takes on a whole new level of significance.

When I was in college, I was sitting in a coffee shop and I noticed a couple of guys talking to people at different tables, and I realized that one of them was wearing a jacket that said “Third Day” on it—the Christian band. It was the bassist and their drummer, and they were giving backstage passes for their concert to whomever they wanted to give them. My roommate and I happened to receive one and got to meet the band backstage before the concert.

Now not just anybody can waltz backstage. You have to have a pass. Nor can you walk up to the ticket booth and demand one. Nobody has a right to a backstage pass. It’s not like we did anything to earn it or deserve it. We were invited backstage simply because the band members chose to invite us. It was by their grace.

In the same way, it is only by God’s grace—his undeserved favor for sinners—that he reveals his glory. No one has a claim on God, or the right to demand to see his glory, not even his friend Moses. Rather, as God says in 33:19, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Only God decides who he’s going to extend his favor to; no one is worthy enough to be entitled to it or to demand it. It is only by his grace that he makes his beauty and majesty known to us.

God Conceals the Fullness of his Glory, because It Is Too Radiant to Behold

Second, *God conceals the fullness of his glory, because it is too radiant to behold*. While God answers Moses’ request affirmatively, notice that he puts a limitation on what he’s going to allow Moses to see. Chapter 33:19: “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The LORD.” . . . But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (33:19-20). God is going to show Moses his glory, but not all of it. Because even Moses, who was not complicit in Israel’s idolatry and who has found favor in God’s sight, is far too inferior and impure to behold the unbridled glory of God without being consumed by his holiness.

We're reminded here that the presence and glory of God is nothing to be trifled with. That God in his moral perfection and sovereign majesty are above us and beyond us to such an extent that no sinner can enter his presence and live. And so whatever Moses is allowed to see of his glory, it will be but a fraction of his true majesty and beauty.

It's like watching a solar eclipse. On August 21 this summer, there will be a solar eclipse passing across the United States. My home town happens to be in the path of the total solar eclipse. But as you learn in grade school, whenever you look at the sun, you can't look directly at it. You have to wear special glasses or make a pinhole projector. Because the light of the sun is so glorious, that without protection it will literally burn the retina in the back of your eye.

And so God makes a pinhole projector of sorts for Moses. Verse 21: "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." (33:21-23). God conceals the fullness of his glory, because it is too radiant to behold.

God Reveals his Glory in his Greatness and Grace

So what *does* God reveal of his glory to Moses? Third, *God reveals his glory in his greatness and his grace*. Throughout Scripture we always see these two attributes of God held together: that he is great and gracious, majestic and merciful, holy and loving. And as he reveals his glory—his worthy reputation—to Moses, it's his greatness and his grace that he puts on display.

But what's interesting that while Moses asks to see God's glory, it's what he hears that really communicates the beauty and radiance of God's worthy reputation—specifically the proclamation of God's name. God said in 33:19, "I will make all my goodness pass before you *and* will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" His name is bound up in his glory. Which makes perfect sense when you think about it. If you give someone a bad name, you muddy their reputation. If you praise someone's name, you're extolling their reputation. So God's name and glory are bound together, such that the way he reveals his glory is by proclaiming his name. The same name he revealed at the burning bush earlier on Sinai, the vey name by which he made himself known to Israel and Pharaoh in the Exodus—Yahweh, I AM. A name he now defines for us in terms of both greatness and grace.

Look at ch. 34:6-7, some of the most foundational words in all of Scripture:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

There are seven attributes listed in God's glory-revealing description of his name. Character qualities that display his unparalleled majesty, his unique beauty and splendor, what sets him apart as God. The first six reveal his grace.

This past spring, during our course on Life Explored, one of the stories we watched was about a geisha in Meiji period Japan.¹ A geisha is traditional hostess who entertains men with conversation, dance, and song, but which sometimes bleeds over into prostitution. The short film shows a geisha whose client is attempting to force himself on her, but who is thwarted by what appears at first to be another client. That man turns out to be her husband, who has tracked her down in order to rescue her. At first he is beaten by the owners of the establishment, but then he hands them a sack of money. He *buys* his wife back out of the business, and takes her home where she is reunited with her young children. But the next morning, when he wakes up, she's gone. She's gone back to the business. So what does the husband do? He gets his hat and sets out again to go get her. *There is glory in grace*. Not only to be willing to take her back, but to pursue her day after day. Loyal, steadfast love and mercy.

Now take that example and multiply it by infinity, and you just might begin to scratch the surface of God's glory revealed in his grace. His merciful compassion to those who are hurting and in need. His gracious favor for those who deserve his wrath. His patience toward his unruly children. His steadfast, loyal love that remains unbroken even when we break our end of the deal. His faithfulness to his word. His forgiveness of our sin. And all of this you see not only proclaimed but demonstrated in the rest of ch. 34, as God renews his covenant with Israel, reaffirming his promise and repeating the stipulations of the covenant, and recording them on new tablets of stone as a testimony to their arrangement (34:10-28). The very people who broke God's covenant before they even received a copy of the agreement—God shows to them mercy and grace and patience and loyal love and faithfulness and forgiveness. This is his glory. He reveals his glory in his grace.

But the seventh attribute in the description of his name also displays his glory, and this one points to his greatness—his justice and holiness. He “will by no means clear the guilty.” There is no glory in turning a blind eye to evil and injustice in this world. It's not glorious for God to be gracious alone—he must also be great in seeing and condemning and addressing evil and sin. And as much as the idea of God's judgment makes us uncomfortable, we know this is true. In the world of social media today, if you don't express outrage immediately over whatever injustice happened in the last hour, people will call you callous and uncompassionate. How much more callous and uncompassionate would an all-knowing and all-powerful God be if he turned a blind eye to sin?

But he doesn't. He promises to deal with it—for as long as that sin takes root in a household, to the third and fourth generation. And he is *glorious* in doing so. God reveals his glory in his greatness and his grace.

And this revelation of God's glory on the mountain becomes a fixture of Israel's faith and confession throughout the Scriptures. Not what Moses sees, but what he hears. Notice how, after God passes by, Moses doesn't pick up a chisel or a paintbrush to draw a picture of the back of God's head as a testimony of his glory for all generations. The first thing he does is fall down and worship. He responds to God's glory in the only proper way—by magnifying that glory in worship. But then, at some point, he writes down this proclamation of his name. He records the

¹ See “Geisha” at <http://www.life.explo.red/geisha/>.

words that he heard. Words that are repeated verbatim at least nine times throughout the Old Testament, and alluded to dozens more.² God reveals his glory in both his greatness and his grace.

God's Revealed Glory is Reflected in his People

The fourth observation about beholding God's glory comes at the end of our passage: *God's revealed glory is reflected in his people*. When Moses comes down from the mountain, he doesn't realize that the skin of his face actually shone with light from being in the presence of God (34:29). Kind of creepy—at least Aaron and the Israelites thought so. They didn't have a category for that. But it makes sense when you think about it. It's like when you go to a classical concert you walk out feeling a little more refined, or when you sit in on a lecture you walk out feeling smarter or more passionate—as if the virtues of those events have rubbed off on you. How much more when you're in the presence of God?

And it didn't just happen when Moses was on the mountain, it happened whenever Moses met with God—his face shone with a kind of reflected glory (34:34-35). It made the people so uncomfortable that he wore a veil when he was finished speaking with God. You cannot behold the glory of the LORD without being affected by it.

But as we follow the trajectory of God revealing his glory throughout Scripture, this brings us to one final point . . .

God Reveals the Fullness of his Glory through his Son, Jesus Christ

God reveals the fullness of his glory through his Son, Jesus Christ. What was concealed on the mountain is ultimately revealed in Jesus. God's greatness and grace come to their climactic expression in his life, death, and resurrection.

- John 1:14, 18: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”
- Hebrews 1:3-4: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”
- 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

What was concealed on the mountain is revealed in Jesus. Not only in his life of moral perfection and unmatched compassion, but preeminently on the cross, where Christ took our sin and made it his own, demonstrating the greatness of God in dealing justly with sin, and the grace of God in dealing mercifully with sinners.

It's no wonder that God shares his name with Jesus. As Paul declares in Philippians 2, because Jesus humbled himself and took on human flesh, taking the form of a servant and becoming

² Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jer. 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3; see also 2 Chron. 30:9; Ps. 111:4; Dan. 9:4; Neh. 9:31.

obedient to the point of death on a cross, “therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him *the name that is above every name*, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). And when Paul says this he’s quoting Isaiah 45, where the word for “Lord” is Yahweh—God’s proper name (cf. Isa. 45:24-25).

And just as beholding God’s glory affected Moses, so it affects us. Yet we no longer need a veil. Because the covenant God has made with us through Christ is even greater than his covenant with Israel, we have boldness to behold and reflect God. As Paul says, “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. . . . And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:12-13, 18). Not only does Christ make known to us the glory of the Lord, he transforms us to reflect that glory through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And this—*this* is the reason we are saved. Not just because of what we get out of it. Not just because we’re desperate and helpless, though we are. Not just because it’s the best thing for us, though it is. Salvation is a gift meant to draw our attention to the Giver. It is the means to the end of beholding, of savoring, of delighting ourselves in and magnifying the glory of God.

And so the question I want us to ask as we reflect on this story this morning: When God gives me something good, how do I respond? Have I confused passion for God with passion for what he gives me? When he answers my prayer for something that I really need, do I simply run off and play with it, to put it to whatever use I had in mind, or do I stop to marvel that the God of heaven heard *my* voice, and in his grace and compassion and loyal love, sovereignly moved hearts and circumstances in this world in such a way as to answer *my* prayer?

When God delivers me from a trial or difficulty, is my response simply relief that the trial is over, so I can now get on with normal life? Go back to what I was doing before the crisis interrupted me? Or do I run to God to behold his glory in worship? Do I reorient my life to focus on what I should have been focusing on before—his worthiness, his faithfulness, his holiness and wisdom, his loving kindness and glorious plan?

Another way of asking this question: Do I have a man-centered view of salvation, or a God-centered one? Have I made the Christian life and faith all about me, where God becomes the means to the end of my dreams, my plans, my wants and desires, my glory? Or is my life and faith a means to the end of his glory? A testimony of his greatness, his mercy and grace, his patience, loyal love, faithfulness, and forgiveness? Is my purpose in life to reflect his image—the image in which he made me, and in which I am being transformed from one degree of glory to another through Christ?

Because not only does a God-centered view of salvation give him the glory he deserves, it also quiets my heart when his answer is no. When salvation is delayed. When trial and hardship endure. When a thousand cries for help go unanswered. If the point of salvation is to make my life better as *I define better*, then I need to find a different god. But if salvation is about bringing glory to *God*, and transforming my life increasingly into *his glorious image*, then there is

something bigger at work here than being rescued from hardship. Paul revels in this mystery of God's sovereignty and goodness in Romans 8:28 when he says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." But what is the *good*? It's being conformed to the image of his son, or as he puts it in v. 30, it's being "glorified"—transformed into God's glorious image. ". . . God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son*, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also *glorified*" (Rom. 8:28-30)

Salvation is ultimately about God's glory, not just our good. It is a means to the end of the glory of God. And so the goal of being God's people and guarding God's presence is not securing his blessing and benefits. It's beholding his glory. He is the treasure.

So as you seek God and serve God, as we enjoy your salvation and rest in him and rejoice in all his benefits, may we never forget that the heart of our relationship is *beholding God*. Seeing and savoring with unveiled face the glory of the LORD in the face of Jesus Christ.