

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 23

Chapters 33

To the Promised Land

Exodus 33:1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.'

At the end of Exodus Chapter 32, Moses had returned to Mount Sinai to offer himself as an atonement for the sins of the people concerning the event with the molten calf. His appeal to the LORD did not change the LORD's mind and, furthermore, Moses was not held accountable for the sins.

Here we see the LORD instructing Moses to return to the camp, gather the people and head out to the Promised Land, but it cannot be an immediate move. Why? The offering had not been taken. The craftsmen had not been introduced and put to work. The Tabernacle and all its furniture, fixtures and utensils had not been constructed. Additionally, the people were being led by the pillars of cloud and fire. They would not be able to leave the campsite until the pillars moved. The question for this passage is "Are all these things to be constructed while they are on the journey to the Promised Land? Hardly!"

When the LORD said, "**To your descendants I will give it,**" He gave Moses hope that the plan would continue as promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The LORD then gave Moses a summary of the future.

Angel to Go Before

Exodus 33:2 "And I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite.³ "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way."

When the move to the Promised Land occurs, an angel will do the work of driving all the descendants of Canaan out of the land. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night will surely guide them to the edge of the Promised Land. Looking ahead in the Scripture, we discover that it will be about 18 months from this time in the story. Once they reach the edge of the Promised Land, they will be at Kadish Barnea. From there a group of spies will be sent into the land of milk and honey. When those spies return with their report, the camp will vote not to go into the Promised Land at that time. Therefore, when the LORD said, "**I will not go up in your midst,**" it meant that the LORD would not lead them with the cloud or the fire into the Promised Land at that time because they "**are an obstinate people.**" Additionally, the LORD had already promised that his group of people would not enter the Promised Land. If the LORD had decided to lead them into the Promised Land just two years out of Egypt, He would have had to destroy them on the way. Who would take their place if everyone over 20 years of age was

killed by the LORD just two years out of Egypt? Would the LORD allow a nation of orphans and young people to enter the Promised Land? If that was the LORD's plan, it could surely work. But that was not the plan. He would finally lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land but not now. Evidently, Moses did not fully understand the meaning of the LORD's words.

People Mourn

Exodus 33:4 When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments.

Some time after the LORD expressed His plan in the previous verse, Moses repeated it to the people. They were saddened by what they heard and did not put on their ornaments. Lest we misstep with this word “**ornaments**,” the Hebrew word means *the trappings of finery* - in this case, the *trappings of their outfits*. As slaves for 400 years, they were not accustomed to the gold and silver ornaments of earrings, chains, bracelets and broaches that they had embraced since leaving Egypt. Why did the people take off their ornaments? Was it because they were sad? Or, was it because they were told by someone to take them off?

Stripped of Ornaments

Exodus 33:5 For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I will do with you.'" 6 So the sons of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mount Horeb onward.

The people took off the ornaments because the LORD told them to do so! What did the LORD mean when He said, “**that I may know what I will do with you.**” Until the molten calf event, the LORD covered the people with a Divine protection regardless of their sin. But since that time, the Divine protection was subject to the actions of the people toward Him. He gave the instructions for them to remove all their ornaments. Surely, some of them had already rid themselves of their ornaments in the making of the molten calf, but not all. Only some of the wives, daughters and sons likely participated in that offering. Here, the LORD required the men to give up their ornaments. What did the LORD mean by this request? Perhaps He was looking for the people who would obey Him! When He was deciding what He would do with the Israelites, it was really the people who were making the decision for what He would do. The ones who did not obey would be dealt with first.

Here is our predicament in trying to understand the timing of this interaction. When did the people hear this report from Moses and when did they strip themselves of their ornaments? Did it occur immediately after Moses returned to the camp or did it occur when they were at Kadish Barnea? Why would we even ask these questions? The next passage is the reason.

Seek Lord at Tent of Meeting

Exodus 33:7 Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And it came about, that everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting which was

outside the camp.⁸ And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent.

The Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting became Moses' office for all meetings with the people. That is easily understood because the LORD's glory had moved from the mountain to rest on the Mercy Seat and there He would speak with Moses. Correct? Not completely. Once the Tabernacle, furniture, fixtures and utensils were constructed, the LORD's Glory would descend from Mount Sinai and take His place in the Holy of Holies and rest upon the Mercy Seat, but that had not occurred yet. Moses must still go to the camp, take the offering, enlist the master craftsmen, transfer the offerings, complete the construction, anoint the construction, and dedicate the priests before the whole plan is in operation. Here the passage says that "**Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp.**" Notice that the passage is in past tense. It is a reflection on how Moses conducted his business as the leader, after the construction was complete. The next verses are the same.

The Pillar of Cloud

Exodus 33:9 And it came about, whenever 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.¹⁰ When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent.

Here we see how the people reacted as they watched Moses come and go from the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle. We also see that it is a reflection of what took place in the past.

Moses Face to Face with the LORD

Exodus 33:11 Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

In this passage, the text addresses the special relationship between the LORD and Moses, they spoke "**face to face.**" When did they speak face to face? The answer is "**the LORD used to speak to Moses.**" The wording is in the past tense. When did the LORD stop speaking with Moses? Reading ahead, we find that the LORD never stopped speaking to him until Moses' death forty years later. Therefore, from the beginning of this chapter, this section had to be a reflection on the entire wilderness journey and was probably added by Joshua after Moses' death. Why Joshua? Look! "**When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.**" When reading through the rest of the story, which Moses and Joshua were not privy to because they were living it, we get to read what happened to them. After Moses came down from the mountain at the end of the 40 days and nights, Joshua was at or near Moses' side for the next 40 years. He would take Moses' place in charge of the camp, in charge of the people, in charge of the records, in charge of the writings. When Moses died, it had to be Joshua who completed the story in the Scripture, perhaps with the help of a scribe. Moses surely knew how to read and write because of his history in Egypt as an adopted child of Pharaoh, but we are not sure whether or not Joshua knew how to write because

he was the son of a slave. Nevertheless, Joshua knew how to speak and there was nothing wrong with enlisting the help of a scribe to write down his words, words divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Moses' Request to Know God's Ways

Exodus 33:12 Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, Thou dost say to me, ' Bring up this people!' But Thou Thyself hast not let me know whom Thou wilt send with me. Moreover, Thou hast said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' ¹³ "Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight. Consider too, that this nation is Thy people."

Still on Mount Sinai with the LORD, Moses had finally grasped the fact that people would be going with him to the door of Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, but he was unclear which as to the people who would be going with him. Who would he leave behind and who would he take? Moses knew the promise of the LORD that the Israelites would be a great and mighty nation as numerous as the sands of the sea, but, if the LORD was going to destroy the current group, who would Moses take with him? It is an interesting conversation. Before the LORD gave Moses an answer, Moses requested to **"know Thy ways, that I may know Thee."**

Moses had been in relationship with the LORD for about six months at this time. What a time that had been! You would think that Moses understood the workings of the LORD clearly by this time and yet, he did not. Up to this point in the story, the LORD had been extremely specific with His instructions to Moses. But here, Moses had finally realized that the LORD gave a little information, then He waited. Later, He gave a little more information, then He waited. The LORD was patient. The LORD allowed the people to conform before He confounded them with the total instruction. They were not responsible for what they did not know; they were responsible for what they had heard the LORD say to them. Moses grasped that fact and it showed in this passage. Moses wanted to know the mind of the LORD so he could know how the LORD thought as well as what He approved and disapproved. Why? Because the LORD had selected Moses to be the leader of the Israelites and he said, **"this nation is Thy people."** The LORD did not need to be reminded of the status of the Israelites, but Moses said it anyway.

Lord's Promise to Be with Moses

Exodus 33:14 And He said, " My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest."

Here we find another interesting English translation that does not reflect the actual Hebrew wording. The Hebrew for **"presence"** is *panim* and it is normally translated *face*. In this chapter we have already seen that the LORD and Moses spoke "face to face." Here, the LORD promised that His face would always be with Moses and the LORD would give Moses rest. The Hebrew for **"rest"** is *nuach* meaning to *dwell, stay, let fall, place, let alone, withdraw, give comfort*. It meant the LORD would be with Moses, dwell with him, stay with him and give him comfort.

Moses to Follow the LORD Only

Exodus 33:15 Then he said to Him, " If Thy presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. 16 "For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?"

Moses used the same word for “presence” as the LORD used in the previous verse and it could be better translated *face*. Nevertheless, Moses was showing his wisdom by affirming to the LORD that the Israelites would not make a move from this day forward without the LORD being with them. If the LORD was with the people, the enemies would know it. When the LORD was with the people, the enemies would know there was something special about the people, something that they just could not put their finger on, something that brought fear to their hearts, something that caused them to treat the Israelites a little differently from the way they treated other nations. Today, we know that it took the work of the Holy Spirit to do that. In Moses’ day, the LORD had not revealed to the people all of His workings as yet, especially the workings of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

LORD Agrees with Moses

Exodus 33:17 And the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight, and I have known you by name."

Moses was on track with the desires of the LORD. It was the LORD’s intentions to be with the Israelites in all their journey through time and all their generations; however, even though the LORD will never leave Israel, it does not mean that Israel will not leave the LORD. If they do not follow the LORD, He will not follow them.

Moses Asks to See the LORD’s Glory

Exodus 33:18 Then Moses said, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" 19 And He said, " I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion."

Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel had already seen the God of Israel; that occurred in Exodus 24:9-11. The LORD let them, and they did not die. In this passage, Moses asked again, but not for the same thing. Here Moses asked to see the LORD’s “glory.” That was a whole different subject. In Exodus 24, “glory” is the *kabod* of *Yehovah*. *Kabod* means the *abundance* or *honor*, *heavy in weight*, but it means much more than that. Moses was asking to see all the copious splendor for the LORD.

The LORD’s answer was that He would “make all My goodness pass before you.” What is the goodness of the LORD? The Hebrew word is *toob* or *tub* and in its strictest sense it means *beauty*. Clearly, it is the beauty of the LORD that shows graciousness and compassion. Moses

wanted to see all of the LORD's beauty. In the context of this chapter we see Moses wanting to know the LORD, His Ways and His Glory!

The LORD's Warning

Exodus 33:20 But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"

The LORD had offered to show Moses all His goodness, His beauty, but He was not willing to show Moses His face. The face was off limits. Did not Moses ask to see the LORD's splendor instead? Why did the LORD take this turn in the theology of this passage? Why were the leaders allowed to see the LORD, His feet and the glassy sea in His eternal home in Exodus 24 but now He will not allow Moses to see His face? Did we not learn in this very chapter that the LORD and Moses spoke "**face to face?**" What did the LORD mean when He says, "**You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!**" Why the mixed messages?

Moses' first encounter with the LORD was about six months before this point in the story with His presence in a burning bush. Next, Moses encountered the LORD in prayer while he was in Egypt. Then, at the mountain of the burning bush, Moses met the LORD in the cloud where His presence was known to Moses by the glow, as if the mountain was on fire. Then there was the strange meeting with the LORD where Moses, Aaron and the elders were allowed to see Him at a distance, to gaze into heaven, to look at the LORD's eternal home, His heavenly dwelling, one that He created for Himself on creation's first day, one that will be seen in the end times descending to the earth to take the place of the earthly Jerusalem. It will be called the New Jerusalem although it is older than any other creation. During the forty years in the wilderness, Moses would be allowed to speak to the LORD behind the Veil of the Holy of Holies with the LORD's presence represented by the Shekinah Glory hovering over the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant. While not technically "**face to face,**" that is where and how the LORD will communicate with Moses. Finally, we come to this place in this time. Nothing had been constructed. The two were still on Mount Sinai. Moses wanted an up-close view of the LORD. But that was not possible. Man was not created by the LORD with the capacity to see the LORD in all His glory, in all His splendor, in all His power. To discover the full magnitude of the LORD up close was more than mortal man could bear in human flesh; to see the LORD in all His glory, Moses would have to leave his worldly flesh behind. But the LORD said, "**I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.**" The LORD would be gracious and compassionate with Moses and grant his request to the fullest extent that Moses could bear. It would change Moses' life from that day forward.

The LORD's Hiding Place

Exodus 33:21 Then the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; ²² and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by.
²³ "Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."

Capture the picture in the wording of the LORD in this passage. Moses would stand on a rock in a special place on the mountain. As the LORD began to pass by, the LORD would pick up Moses and place him in a hole in the rock; the LORD would do this, not Moses. The LORD would then cover Moses who was in the hole in the rock with is hand until He had passed by Moses. Then, once the LORD had passed by, He would allow Moses to see His back as He left. What did the back of the splendor of the LORD look like? Moses did not tell us. What did the palm of the LORD's hand look like that He used to cover the hole where He stuffed Moses for safety? Moses did not tell us. What did Moses see as he was waiting on the rock for the LORD to appear before he was placed in the hole in the rock? Moses did not tell us. How long did it take? Did Moses feel strange and different? Moses did not tell us. Did it change Moses in any way? Absolutely!

We are left in the dark by this chapter and the absence of many details.