

## Prayer

Your provision and Your love, Lord Jesus, surpass every dream we have had, every desire we maintain, and every hope that we might have. You know us through and through, and confirm Your love for us on each and every day. Forgive us for not always accepting what You have done for us, and lead us by Your grace to receive all You offer us. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Liberty

*Pray today for the liberty of women across the world. Many women are culturally oppressed and in more ways than we often appreciate. Pray for all who help to liberate women today.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for people in China whose liberties have been compromised*
- *Pray against the evils that are oppressing humanity today*
- *Give thanks to God for the joys and benefits of true liberty*

## Meditation

Help us get the balance right, Lord Jesus Christ,  
Between what we do for ourselves, and what we do for others.

When it is Your will, and it is right,  
Direct our thoughts towards ourselves;  
So that we may give attention to our spiritual life  
And all the responsibilities of living as Your people in the world.

When it is Your will, and it is right,  
Direct our thoughts towards other people;  
So that we may put the faith You have given us into action,  
And seek to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons.

Help us get the balance right between these two,  
For the sake of our own spiritual health,  
The wellbeing of the whole church;  
And the good of all the world.

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## Bible Study - Exodus 33:12-23

<sup>12</sup> Moses said to the LORD, 'See, You have 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." <sup>13</sup> Now, I beg you, if I have found favour in Your sight, please explain Your intentions to me, so that I may understand You and find favour in Your sight; and please remember that this nation is indeed Your very own people.'

<sup>14</sup> He answered, 'My presence will go with them, and I will give you rest.'

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to Him, 'If You will not go with me, do not send us on from here. <sup>16</sup> For how then will it be known that I have found favour in Your sight, both I and your people. Is it not in your going with us that we are distinct, both I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth?'

<sup>17</sup> The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; because you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'

<sup>18</sup> Moses said, 'Then please show me Your glory.'

<sup>19</sup> And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim my name, "The LORD" in your presence. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. <sup>20</sup> But you cannot see my face; for no one may see me and live.'

<sup>21</sup> Then the LORD said, 'Look, there is a place close by me, where you may stand on the rock.  
<sup>22</sup> When 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; <sup>23</sup> then I will take my hand away, and you will see my back; but my face will not be seen.'

## Review

This passage appears straightforward; firstly, Moses managed to get the Lord to revoke His decision not to go with the people on their journey to the Promised Land (33:14,17). After this, we read about Moses' astonishing request to see the Lord's glory (33:18), and the Lord's famous response of promising to reveal Himself while Moses was hidden in the cleft of a rock (33:21-23). If we read the passage closely, however, we may find it rather puzzling, and some Bible versions of this passage are very confusing; the intricate dialogue is so complicated it becomes impossible to work out who is speaking to whom! Then, the first part of the passage is repetitive. God had said he would not travel amongst His people to Canaan (33:3,5), so Moses begged the Lord to change His mind (33:12,13), to which a positive reply was received (33:14). Then, as if he had not noticed, Moses asked again (33:15,16), and received a second reply (33:17)!

The passage is best known, however, for the promise God gave to Moses to pass him by in the cleft of the rock (33:21-23). The incident has inspired preachers, who have used it to explain the difference between Moses' partial sight of God's glory and the full revelation found in Jesus Christ. It is right to explore this theme, but the truth is that the whole passage is bound by an important, and very different theme. God was teaching Moses the important lesson that His real presence was not to be reckoned according to what could be physically seen, but according to His character as perceived in what He did.

Moses struggled with this and sought reassurance that God was with him, finally asking to see God's 'glory' (33:18)! His problem was that because God has said he would not travel amongst the people, he wondered whether God would remain with him. His own fate was bound up with the people; how could he lead them if he did not know 'who' (meaning 'what god') would go with him (33:12)? Moses pleaded with God; he had been shown great favours, but now he need to know what God really intended to do (33:13). God's answer was plain; due to the people's repentance (33:4-6), he would go with them and put Moses' mind at rest (33:14).

This answer was not enough for Moses, however. It was all very well for God to say this, but at this critical moment, Moses needed personal assurance that God would be with him; so he said 'If you will not go with me, do not send us on from here ...'. Moses' questioning continues throughout the rest of verse 16; 'how will it be known that I have found favour in Your sight, both I and Your people?' (33:16). The Lord then replied with the assurance that Moses yearned for; 'I will do the very thing that you have asked, because you have found favour in my sight ...' (33:17).

Moses then went further and asked if he might see God's glory to seal the favour, but God would not grant this. He would speak His name and identify His characteristics of grace and mercy, but not reveal His glory (33:19:20). To demonstrate this, God granted him the great honour of standing in the cleft of a rock as He passed by. It would be a demonstration of God's favour that emphasised that God would not be seen by a mortal man.

To this day, it is important for us to accept that we know God by faith not by sight, even though we have the evidence of God in the life of Jesus Christ; we do not see Him, but we know about God's character and His work in the world through Jesus. Moses had to learn these things without knowing the Saviour, and in his day it was difficult for him and the Israelites to appreciate the nature of God, and this is what lies at the heart of our passage. As Jesus Himself said, 'blessed are those who have not seen, and yet who come to believe' (John 20:29).

### Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What was Moses' first request and God's response (33:12-14)?
- What was Moses second request and God's response (33:15-17)?
- Why does God reveal His nature in this way here in this passage?
- What was God willing to show Moses, and why?

## Notes on the text and translation

**V13** *'now, I beg you, if I have found favour ...'* You will not find the phrase 'I beg you' in most translations, but this verse contains two instances of a small Hebrew words 'na', which indicate an attitude of imploring concern. It is sometimes translated 'please', or 'I beg you', but where the sense of the sentence is obvious, it is sometimes left out of a translation. Here, because it is repeated I reckon

*that it is important, and indicates Moses' beseeching the Lord for information. I therefore think it right to give it some emphasis by translating the word in this way.*

- V13** *'... your very own people'* The words 'very own' will not be found in most translations, however, the word order in Hebrew is not standard, and the emphasis here is on appealing to the Lord to consider that the nation belongs to Him. This translation brings out this important emphasis.
- V14** *'my presence will go with them ...'* This verse is very difficult to translate. The Hebrew says 'my presence they will go', but this does not make sense. The only way to justify what the Hebrew says is to suggest that this is a shortened way of saying that God will indeed go with His people – the previous use of the word 'go' in chapter 33 is in verse 1, where God says 'Get up and go from this place.' Earlier He said He would not go, now he says He would.
- V15** *'if you will not go with me ...'* There is considerable confusion amongst scholars as to whether this is correct or whether it should be 'if you will not go with us'. The Hebrew denotes a plural but it seems out of place, and the Septuagint (the earliest indication of what ancient Jews thought the passage meant) says that it should be the singular 'me'. If this is the case, then it helps with the general point I make about the passage (see study).
- V16** *'Is it not in your going with us that we are distinct ...'* Various Bible versions treat this passage very differently, and it would take a great deal of time to explain the possible differences. Here, I have accepted the same method of translation as the English Standard Version, which suggests that the phrase 'your going with us' is part of Moses' plea about the distinctiveness of God's people. Theologically, this makes more sense than what you will find in other Bible versions.

## Going Deeper

This whole passage is very much about Moses' own understanding of God. Remember that when Moses first encountered God at the burning bush (Exodus 3), he had asked God for some means whereby he could identify God to the people of Israel when he went back to Egypt to announce the mission on which he had been sent. God's answer was twofold. He announced His name 'JHWH' (Ex 3:14) and told Moses that He was the God who had acted in the past through the ancestors of the people; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:16). It is interesting that later in this passage (33:19), God's answer to Moses' query is to proclaim His name and point to His deeds of graciousness and mercy.

This becomes a theme in this passage, and in Scripture as a whole. To this day, the revelation we have of God is largely made up of what we know about Him through His name, including the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and the many variations in Scripture; 'Almighty God' 'Lord of Hosts' 'My Shepherd' etc.. We also know what God has done, in Jesus through Scripture, in the life of the church, and in our own lives.

### ***What was Moses' first request and God's response (33:12-14)?***

At this point in the study, we will go through verses 12 to 14 carefully. It is only by doing this that we will understand the passage. Moses' first words are these: 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but You have not let me know who you will send with me!' In other words, Moses knew full well that God said He would not go with the people but Moses felt naked and uncertain where this left him, personally. Was he to be accompanied by the angel mentioned earlier by God (33:2), or by whom? From his point of view, if he retained a close connection with the Lord, then he would have to stand apart from the people together with Him, so how would he be able to lead the people?

The situation presented a logical impasse for Moses. God had blessed him and he stood in God's presence in the Tent of Meeting praying, but Moses could not sustain this kind of ministry and leadership through a journey to the Promised Land! So he said to the Lord; 'Now, I beg You, if I have found favour in Your sight, please explain Your intentions to me' (33:13). He sought God's favour, and subtly included the people of Israel in his petition only at the very end, stressing, 'this nation is indeed Your very own people' (33:13). In a powerful and masterly prayer, Moses acted as the people's leader by identifying with them utterly, and the lines between personal petition and intercession for the nation become blurred at the end of his prayer. Moses genuinely asked for greater understanding himself; but by asking in this manner, he put it to God that He would have to bless both him and the people with His presence, or none of them.

God's answer was that He would indeed go with the people, but the word He gave Moses was equivocal, He said 'I will give you rest!' What did this mean? It was God's way of challenging Moses to go further, with a promise that He would eventually be satisfied! This is why the dialogue continues.

### ***What was Moses second request and God's response (33:15-17)?***

Moses immediately picked up the lack of clarity about his own position and asked about this; 'If you will not go with me, do not send us from here ...'. I have quoted this verse again because many Bible versions omit

'with me' at this point, to the great detriment of the reader. If you have read my notes above, you will be aware that I have decided to base my translation here on the ancient Septuagint, which tells us quite clearly that ancient Jews interpreted this passage exactly as we are doing now. They perceived that Moses was seeking personal assurance from God so that He could lead the people.

People of earlier times were also sensitive to something we have largely forgotten today. We live in a world in which everyone has an opinion about national leaders and the elected political parties and representatives that sustain government, by which a country is governed. In ancient times, unless a leader was completely and unanimously supported by the people, then he could not lead, indeed, he would be removed and replaced with another leader. For this reason, Moses emphasised to God the unity of people, leader and God, which was essential for any nation in ancient times; 'is it not in Your going with us that we are distinct, both I and your people ...?' Notice as well that the phrase 'I and Your people' appears twice in verse 16, bringing pressure to bear on God to bring about the restoration of that unity, a restoration that would allow His work to be done of claiming the Promised Land.

God knew the situation well enough and he knew Moses well. Perhaps He needed to know that Moses could voice and express the spiritual truth of leadership amongst God's people. The end result however was that at the second attempt, Moses request was completely answered. God confirmed that he would do 'the very thing that you have asked' and also confirmed His favour upon Moses as the leader of Israel (33:17).

### ***Why does God reveal His nature in this way here in this passage?***

People do like to see things to believe them. They like idols because they can say 'this is my god', and they like images and objects through which they can say 'I see God through this thing ... in this way ... or that'. Sight is a powerful thing, and in Jesus' lifetime, people wanted Him to perform signs (Matt 12:39f.), and to say He was the Messiah! Did they want Him to make a demonstration by standing and saying 'Look at me, I am God!' Jesus did not do this, He went about doing the Father's will, and we respect Him for this. Frankly, we would suspect that anyone who did such a thing would be an exhibitionist who did not measure up to the qualities of God's servant. We have now become used to the idea that we know God by what he does and His affect on the world rather than physically through what we see. To this day, none of us see God in His glory, and Paul reflects on this by saying 'for now we see in a glass dimly, but then, face to face' (1 Cor 13:12).

So here in Exodus, God refused to show Himself to Moses in all His glory (33:18-23). In a remarkable way that is typical of the revelation of God throughout Scripture, God revealed not His glory, but His name and His character (33:19). Consistent with His previous revelation to Moses at the burning bush, and presumably to remind Moses of just this, he proclaimed His name 'The Lord', and also defined His characteristics in terms of the word 'goodness' (33:19).

We might not have been expecting this word, and we might have thought He would say 'love', or some form of it such as 'covenant faithfulness' or 'loving kindness'. However, Scripture is consistent. Goodness is the essential property of God demonstrated in His attitude towards all Creation; 'and God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). His properties of graciousness and favour towards people according to His free choice are demonstrations of that goodness, and His desire to act mercifully towards those who turn to Him in repentance (the beginnings of salvation by faith) is also a result of His inherent goodness.

This passage challenges us firmly to believe that one of the fundamental properties of God, according to Scripture, is that He is good. It is simple to say, takes a lifetime to understand, yet we will only see fully when we see God in His glory in eternity!

### ***What was God willing to show Moses, and why?***

In the light of this, God was willing to promise Moses that He would place Him in the cleft of a rock while he passed by. Note that this passage only describes the promise, and the fulfilment of it comes later in tomorrow's passage, and for this reason, I will not dwell on the drama of the event here. It is not hard to understand why Moses wanted to see God's glory, but he received more than he bargained for when God showed him His back! He was honoured by a presence of God so bright that he had to put a veil over his face (34:29-35), and God's glory was then perceived in Moses by its affect on Him, after it had 'passed Him by' as God so prophesied (33:22)!

We can only do what generations of others have done, which is to read the story of what happened when God passed by Moses while He was on Sinai (34:5-10). For we read that the effect of this experience was to leave Moses in an unassailable position as the leader of God's people. Moses did not receive the full answer to his request, but he certainly received an answer sufficient for him to fulfil his call, and this is the lesson we should perhaps learn from this.

## **Application**

A number of applications have come to light already within our study. We have seen the extraordinary power of Moses' petition as a leader, evolving into intercession for the people; this is a powerful example of prayer for any leader of God's people. Moses' persistence with God is also worth learning from, for in our 'instant' world, we sometimes say one prayer and if God does not answer we stop as if we have done all that may be required. Remember, the New Testament expresses dislike of long prayers (Mark 12:40), but it does recommend pounding at the gates of heaven for God's answers (Luke 18:3f.)!

However, on top of this, it is extraordinary to see that the nature of God's revelation to Moses is remarkably that same as His revelation to us now, even though we have the benefit of the testimony of Jesus' life now. People still want to see God, and we still have to work on the evidence that is left behind for us to use and interpret, whether from the life of Christ, the history of the church, or from our own lives.

Perhaps the most impoverished Christians today are those who may be led to expect to 'see' something of God in their midst that is not how God works in our world today, and according to Scripture, both Old and New Testament, never has. Jesus Himself healed the sick and delivered demons, but shunned the dramatic to concentrate on helping the poor and those who came to Him in the middle of His stressed and sometimes difficult ministry. The true ministry of Christ in the world does not depend on the drama of people saying 'God is doing something powerful in our midst because we can see it as this movement or that'; it is built on the fact of people being like Jesus because they have been enabled and enthused to be God's people in the world. True revival empowers God's people to be His effective witnesses in the world, and they become the salt and the light through which God changes the world. They become His 'goodness'.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group how we know God exists when we cannot 'see Him'.
2. Why was it essential that Moses and the people were both confident of God's presence for the journey to the Promised Land?
3. Why is it that we cannot see all of God's glory now, and when will we be able to see this? In your opinion, what is God's 'glory'?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*This passage has been extremely difficult to comment upon because when I first read the passage and looked at it in Hebrew, it made little sense to me, even though I had read it many times before. Nevertheless, I quickly found that it said far more than I thought. I sometimes fear that when I write about Scripture, there is more there, and I do not see it. My constant hope is that those who read these studies are not slaves to what is written, but are enthused to read and discover for themselves the secrets of God's Words. In them there is great treasure.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What do you want of God? This is a serious question, because sometimes, people want to have something of God that they cannot have, just like Moses in this passage today. The real test of their faith is how they deal with not having what they want, but having what God has given. Ask yourself this question carefully.*
- *Pray for Christian people who have been led astray in their expectations of faith and religion by preachers and leaders who have departed the ways of God and attempted to mould the Gospel to their own message. It happens, so please pray about it with care.*

## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour of the World; we thank You and praise You for our heritage. May we be conscious of our responsibilities to those who come after us and seek to pass on the Gospel through all we do and say. We ask this in Your name, Jesus Christ, AMEN

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