

Prayer

Lord Jesus, will you come and help us even now, at this very moment in time? Will you forgive us our sins, teach us the truth, and guide us on the right pathways of life? Will You hear our prayers, guide our thoughts and direct our work? We praise You, because You have shown that You will do all these things and more, if we wait upon you with expectancy; so come upon us with power and guide our lives today: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Water

Pray about the way in which rivers and water sources are managed in your country. Pray that God-given natural resources will be managed properly, and for the benefit of all.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for justice and personal freedom in the countries of S.E. Asia*
- *Pray about the issue of wasteful packaging and its consequences*
- *Give thanks for the joy of doing the Lord's work, and doing it well*

Meditation

There may be moments when faith seems distant;
But still, Lord Jesus, You are closer than the air.

We long to know 'why' when life's mysteries loom large;
But You hold the secrets of the world in Your heart.

We search for truth, seeming to be near, yet so far;
But You are the truth that we long to find.

We struggle with our fears, our worries and temptations;
But You remain constant; Your love never fails.

We fight against evil when it strikes, unexpectedly;
But You have the victory over the enemy, forever.

So bridge the gap between our experience of life
And the glorious truth of Your Kingdom.

Hasten the coming of the time we await
When everything in this life is fulfilled in You.

Bible Study - Exodus 34:27-35

²⁷ The LORD said to Moses, 'Write for yourself these words; for by speaking these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. ²⁸ So it was that he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights, without eating bread or drinking water. Then he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that as he descended, the skin of his face glowed because he had spoken with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was glowing, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ So Moses called out to them; and Aaron and all the community leaders came back to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² After this, all the Israelites came near, and he charged them all with what the LORD had said to him on Mount Sinai.

³³ When Moses finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. ³⁴ Whenever Moses went into the presence of the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and when he came out, he told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ and the Israelites would see that the skin of Moses' face was shining; so Moses would put the veil on his face again until he went in to speak with Him.

Review

This reading concludes the story of Israel's rebellion and sin at the foot of Mount Sinai. By the grace of God, the Covenant was restored, Moses was re-established as the leader of God's people, and all the words of God's revelation given to Moses during his stay on the top of Sinai were finally handed over to the people.

When Moses was charged by God with the task of bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt, he was given the objective of leading the Israelites to Mount Sinai to worship God before taking them on to the Promised Land (3:16-22). Clearly, the first part of God's plan was to extract them from their slavery and forge them into a people with their own identity and a relationship with Him as their God, and this had now been achieved. Although there are five more chapters in the book of Exodus (chs. 35-39), the vast majority of these chapters repeats what we have already read (chs. 25 to 31), but describing the doing of what was previously commissioned. By the time the narrative of Exodus continues in chapter 40, it is to conclude the story of the Exodus by describing the Israelites leaving Mount Sinai as the united people of God (Exodus 40:34-38).

The people of Israel had been challenged to worship the Lord the God who had saved them and give Him exclusive honour. However, they quickly rebelled against Him, but when punished, they repented and their leader Moses sought to renew the people's covenant with their God. Throughout the Old Testament, you can see this same pattern of rebellion, punishment, repentance and restoration (or renewal) at work. It is found in each phase of the story of the Judges (see a graphic description of this in Judges 2:18,19f.), and it is found throughout the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah (as in 1 and 2 Kings), and even in the return from Exile (as in Ezra and Nehemiah). Because of this, it forms the background to the work of the prophets, and explains why they found it necessary to speak of a time when God would bring this terrible cycle to an end. They prophesied the coming of God's 'Messiah', His 'Anointed One', who would make unilateral atonement for all sin, and make the love of God available for anyone willing to accept Him.

The importance of the passage we have read today lies in its description of God's extraordinary and powerful work to bring about restoration and Covenant renewal with His people. After the people's sin (32:1-6), the path towards this end had been slow and painful, but all God's glory and honour is demonstrated in the authority with which he led and sustained Moses on the mountain for forty days and nights. He instructed Moses to write down everything that had been revealed to him, and the words of the Ten Commandments were inscribed on the tablets of stone Moses had brought up the mountain (34:28).

When Moses returned to the bottom of the mountain, the same people who had previously found his absence too long now watched in awe as Moses appeared with his face shining with the glory of God! Here was visible evidence of God's power and presence in their midst, the very thing that the people craved for the journey to the Promised Land (33:1f.)! Moses was unaware that his face shone, and the mystery of this supernatural phenomenon has defied all who have attempted to explain it logically ever since. This is because God did this for the Israelites rather than for us; they needed this supernatural reassurance of God's presence.

The only scriptural explanation of this extraordinary event is found in the letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 3:7-11), where Paul explains characteristically that if such a magnificent glory was shown through Moses upon the revelation of the law, how much more glorious was the ministry of 'justification' found through Jesus Christ! The first glory faded because it was limited to Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness, but the glory of God in Christ never fades!

Going Deeper

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

- What was written down by Moses while he was on Mount Sinai (34:27)?
- Who wrote the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone (34:28)?
- What exactly happened to Moses' skin and face (34:29,30)?
- What was the result of Moses' return to the camp of the Israelites (34:31,32)?
- Why did the glow on Moses' face persist, and why did he use a veil (34:33-35)?

Notes on the text and translation

V27 'Write for yourself these words' Most translations give 'write these words'. However, there is an emphasis here on Moses' actions and role which is clear in Hebrew but difficult to express in English. The nearest I can get to it is to add 'for yourself' as if Moses had to write a 'aid memoir' of all the things God has told him (see study).

V27 'for by speaking these words ...' In the Hebrew there is a small phrase ('al-pe') which is not translated by most Bible versions because it is regarded as superfluous to the meaning of the text.

Literally, it means 'upon the mouth', and I believe it is a reference to the fact that by speaking the words of the law God has made a covenant with Israel, through the agency of Moses (see study).

V29 'the skin of his face glowed.' *The Hebrew word here is peculiar, coming from a word meaning 'horns' or 'display'. The word was used of the display made by an animal to attract its own kind. Scholars believe that the form of the word used here (the 'hiphil') means a display in the sense of a radiance of shining light. I have avoided the word 'radiance' because we speak of people being 'radiant' with various emotions quite commonly, but this was an extraordinary experience, and 'glowed' offers us this sense of awe at what happened. It clearly made the people frightened (34:30)!*

Going Deeper

What was written down by Moses while he was on Mount Sinai (34:27)?

In verse 27, the instruction given to Moses by the Lord is clear; he was to write down everything God said to institute a Covenant with Israel. Some say that this instruction indicates that Moses was the writer of the whole of the first five books of the Bible, but whether this is the case or not, what Moses wrote here was specifically what had been revealed to him on his two stays on the mountain top (24:15-18 and 34:28). These were the laws of social behaviour and legal restriction (chapters 21,22) and those describing religious observance (chapter 23). In addition, the instructions about making the dwelling place for the Lord's presence, the Tabernacle (chapters 25 to 27 and 30) and then the robes for the High Priest and other priests (chapter 28) and the other instructions about the ordination of the High Priest and other features of worship (chapters 29 to 31).

Even in those days, a written record meant permanence and security, and the Lord was seeking to demonstrate to the people of Israel the eternal nature of His covenant with those who put their trust in Him. Although many translations of the Bible do not convey this very well (see notes above), the text of verse 27 is very clear that the Covenant is made between God and Moses, with Moses representing the people of Israel.

Who wrote the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone (34:28)?

Some have wondered why Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and nights, without food or drink (34:28). One suggestion is that it took Moses that length of time to complete the writing down of what he had been told! This is unlikely; the description adds to our sense of awe at what happened on the mountain, for although Moses could go without food for a long period of time (as many have since) no one could go without water. Moses was sustained for his task by God Himself. Speaking in Deuteronomy, some time later, Moses described praying for the people on the mountain top; 'I stayed on the mountain top for forty days and nights, as I did the first time, and the Lord listened to me at this time as well, It was not His will to destroy you ...' (Deut 10:10).

The great debate about verse 28 is whether 'he wrote on the tablets ...' means that Moses did it or that God did it! If we look at the Hebrew closely, it is possible to argue this both ways, as thousands of scholars have done over the centuries. In a previous study, I mentioned that it is unwise to make a clear cut distinction between the actual deeds of God and what people do on His behalf at His bidding, for mostly, the two are the same. Would it make any difference to our regard for the Ten Commandments if we believed that God wrote them with His own finger or Moses chiselled them at God's command? If it does, then it should not. God certainly works through miracles, but the pursuit of objects touched by the hand of God has beguiled and misled people for centuries; from the attempt to find the lost Ark of the Covenant to the controversy over claims made for the Turin shroud.

The Ten Commandments were written on two identical stones, one for God and one for Israel, and they represented the restored covenant between God and His people, broken after the incident of the golden calf (32:1f.). The Tablets were required if God was to be present with His people in the 'Holiest Place' of the Tabernacle Tent, within the Ark of the Covenant. All this was yet to be built, but there was no point in building a dwelling place for God if there was no symbol of His presence and His Covenant.

What exactly happened to Moses' skin and face (34:29,30)?

One of the most fascinating features of this famous story is the description of Moses' glowing face (34:29)! The text is very clear that the skin of Moses' face was radiating something like light; no one had seen this before, and it was difficult to describe. We might imagine that if the radiance was from his mouth, then God was present with Moses' speech, or if his eyes glowed, then God was within Moses especially as an individual. There is nothing else in scripture that speaks of the skin as having any special significance, but in a few places, the Old Testament uses the term 'skin' to speak of life itself (see Job 2:4, Lam 3:4, Ez 37:6f.). It is therefore possible that the shining of Moses' skin indicated that the whole of his life was filled with God's blessing and presence.

The glowing of Moses' face and skin was symbolic in a number of ways. Firstly, Moses did not know it (34:29), and was unaware of the reasons why people responded to him differently. In a small way, a similar thing is true of the very holy people we sometimes meet in life, for they would be the last people to agree that they were special! Nevertheless, Moses had to accept what God had done with him and throw a veil over his face to ensure that it did not prevent people from coming near to him (34:33f.)

The glowing of Moses' face was a potent statement to the people of Israel that their leader had been in the very presence of God, and something of that mysterious presence was now visible in him. They could not ask for more in their quest to have their God go with them on the journey to Canaan (33:12f.). The fear of Aaron upon seeing Moses was the fear of coming too near to God's presence, for they felt in their spirits the holiness of God that radiated from the Moses; but it was something with which they needed to familiarise themselves.

What was the result of Moses' return to the camp of the Israelites (34:31,32)?

We might have expected Moses to return to the camp of Israel holding the stone tablets of the covenant as evidence of his successful time spent at the top of the mountain, but after the initial fear of the people at the sight of Moses, he called out to them, and on hearing his voice, they returned. Clearly, the glowing of Moses' face meant that they could not recognise him normally, and they were only able to identify him positively by the sound of his voice (34:31). The text says that 'Aaron and the community leaders came back to him'. The sentence implies that at the point when Moses went up to the mountain for the second time, there was some doubt in the people's minds about Moses' leadership. The effect of the glowing was to restore faith in Moses as Israel's leader; the glory of this glowing was God's blessing on him, and never again did Moses have to deal with wholesale rebellion against his leadership on the journey to Canaan.

After the leaders of the community approached Moses (34:31) the rest of the people 'came near' (34:32), and Moses was able at last to deliver his charge. All God's servants throughout the Old Testament are given something to do or to say, and they are incomplete until they have fulfilled that charge. Abraham could not pass on the Covenant to his son Isaac until he had passed the supreme test of faith on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22), and the prophets of the Old Testament were unsatisfied and restless until their 'burden' was discharged (Jeremiah 23:33f.). In the same way, Moses was unfulfilled until he had passed on the Covenant laws and requirement of God given to him, but for the people. Israel was not able to negotiate these, of course, because the Covenant was entirely one-sided; the Ten Commandments were by this time written on tablets of stone as the symbolic heart of God's personal religious ethical and moral code for His people. Moses had also written down the many rules and regulations that would form the basis of Israel's later law, ready for the time when they would enter the Promised Land.

Why did the glow on Moses' face persist, and why did he use a veil (34:33-35)?

The text here in Exodus tells us that the glowing of Moses' face and skin persisted, though we read no more about it in the rest of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Paul certainly assumed that this was because the glowing faded (2 Cor. 3:7f.), not just in Moses' life, but in the effectiveness of the law he brought down from Sinai. This is a fair point, but for a time at least, Moses had to cover his face so that the people were not fearful of the God who was with him. It was a veil he was only able to remove when he went into the presence of God again, presumably when the Tent of the Tabernacle was built.

The awesomeness of this evidence of the Lord's presence may well have served to illustrate God's presence amongst His people until the 'Shekinah' glory of God descended on the Tabernacle, later on in Exodus (34), ready to lead the people through the desert on their journey to the Promised Land.

Application

The indwelling presence of God shows itself in people today in a variety of ways. This text has the tremendous benefit of a substantial explanatory text in the New Testament to help us understand it for today. Paul makes it clear that the glory of the Old Covenant as shown on the face of Moses has been surpassed by the glory of the revelation of Jesus Christ; a never fading glory of God's complete revelation of salvation. The law received by Moses could only ever help people so far in their spiritual journey, and faith in Christ would complete that journey (2 Cor 3:7f.). Paul also suggested that although Moses had to hide this glory because of the fear of the Israelites, the New Testament people of God would have nothing to hide; for 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor 3:17). After speaking like this, Paul came out with his famous phrase 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another ...' (2 Cor 3:18). Paul was speaking of those whose journey of faith had led them from Judaism to Christ, of course. However, he used language that suggested that all of us, whatever our background, are being constantly changed through the journey of our discipleship into the glory of the image of God Himself, the image in which we were made (Genesis 1:27,28) and to which we return. This is one of the most powerful descriptions of the spiritual journey of discipleship in the New Testament, and Paul developed it from the text we have read today.

Despite the great importance of this text in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, there is still some benefit to be had from reading the original story here, to see how God worked graciously through both revealing His glory in Moses and helping both Moses and the people cope with the consequences of this revelation. The Lord is constantly seeking to reveal Himself to His people; it is His desire to be seen on earth so that people might be saved.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is Scripture a sufficient record of God's 'words' to us today, or should we keep other written records of what He has said and what He does?
2. How does God demonstrate His glory today, and what experiences have you had of such supernatural phenomena?
3. When we speak of the glory of Jesus Christ, what do we mean, and how do we experience it?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

In the course of my life I can recall a few occasions when I have felt and sometimes seen God's glory in ways that I find difficult to explain. Whenever I try to explain what I saw or felt, then the words I use feel unhelpfully trite, because nothing can convey the sense of wonder at what happened. Some people are content to remain sceptical of such stories in the Bible and suggest that they are merely the result of exaggerated imagination. However, I believe it is impossible for anyone to remain a sceptic if the Lord has once shown Himself in such powerful ways; it is unforgettable.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you experienced the sequence of sin, repentance and renewal? Has this sequence recurred many times in your life? If this is the case then you have to ask whether you have become bound by something not yet submitted to the Lord. God's intention is that you should be free, so offer this to Him for His judgement.*
- *Pray that God's people may have a new experience of His glory through Jesus Christ, and be motivated to faith through the evidence of His presence in the midst of His people.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, may we have no fear of explaining our faith to others. May we be confident in what You have done for us and confident about what You are doing with us, and so give others the testimony of a life lived at peace with You, who are our creator and our Lord: AMEN
