

Encounters with God - Cleft of the Rock

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[0 : 00] turn to the first of these readings, Exodus chapter 33 and verse 18.

Moses said to God, please show me your glory. And God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you and I will proclaim before you my name, the Lord, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy.

But he said, you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live. 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.

And then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen. And so on.

I'm sure you've heard before that the book of Exodus centers on a theme and the theme, perhaps surprisingly, is not Moses.

[1 : 21] Moses is not the central character in the book of Exodus. God is the central character. And the glory of God is the central theme.

It begins with God manifesting or disclosing his glory at the very beginning of the book in the burning bush. That's what Moses saw when he approached when God called him from the flame in the burning bush.

And at the end of the book, the book ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle in the most holy place. But the glory of God, it goes all the way, it flows all the way through the book.

So it's perhaps not surprising that that is the theme that we find in this passage. I want to ask several questions and to try and explain what is going on and how it relates to the New Testament and to what we are doing today in remembering the Lord's death.

And I want to do that by asking several questions about this request that Moses brought to God on this occasion. The request was, show me your glory.

[2 : 37] That's what he wanted. He wanted God to show him his glory. And the first of these questions is, why did Moses ask God to show him his glory?

These are natural questions that I guess arise in the mind of anyone who's reading this book or this passage. Why did Moses ask God to see the glory of God?

Well, you can answer that question from several different perspectives. One of them is the exact circumstance of that particular moment. It comes right in the wake of Israel's idolatry.

Moses had gone up Mount Zinai to collect the law. And meanwhile, the people, while Moses was not with them, they had turned away from God.

They had built for themselves a golden calf. And when Moses was told by God that the people had turned their back on God and went down, he saw this horrific sight in front of him.

[3 : 40] Instead of worshipping the Lord, the living and true God, who they had come to discover as never before in the last few weeks and months of their experience, instead of worshipping God, they were worshipping an idol.

They were worshipping someone who they had built and which was ostensibly taking the form of God. They were sinning against God in a fundamental way.

And this filled Moses with horror when he saw this. It was one of these situations where it was like this cannot be happening. It was like Moses couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Because it's one thing for a heathen nation to worship a false god. It's one thing for the Philistines to worship their gods or the Moabites or the Midianites or all these surrounding nations.

It's another thing altogether for Israel to worship a false god. Or to make for themselves a form, I should be more precise in this, to make for themselves a form, a visible form of God who is invisible.

[4 : 54] Especially after what they had seen in the last few months. Their living and true God was responsible for all the plagues of Egypt, by which they were set free from the bondage and the misery of slavery in Egypt.

This was a series of miracles that God had performed. There was the blood and the frogs and the locusts and the lice and all the rest ending in the death of the firstborn.

And then there was the parting of the Red Sea where God literally divided the sea in front of them. There could be no mistake as to the miracle of this occasion.

And the timing of the occasion was such that it allowed them to make their way on dry land across the Red Sea to safety. And God brought the sea back on top of the Egyptians once again and destroyed them all.

Not only that, but God appeared to them in the flame, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. And guided them from day to day into wherever he wanted them to go.

[6 : 04] There could not be any mistake as to who was their God. There could not be any mistake that this God was on their side. But neither could there be any mistake as to the awesomeness of this.

This is the God who alone must be worshipped. No one else. He gives his glory to no one else. He shares his power with no one else.

And yet here were these people, not only so, but they had stood at the bottom of Mount Sinai. And when God had commanded them to do everything that he wanted them to do, they promised, Exodus chapter 24, they promised all that the Lord commands us to do, we will do.

They had seen, like we saw yesterday, they had seen the darkness, the gloom, the thunder, the lightning. He had heard the voice of God. They had told Moses, please intercede for us.

Please mediate for us. We can't cope with who was so manifestly obvious, the only living and true God. And yet here they were now, a matter of days later, having turned away from worshipping him to worshipping something that was false.

[7 : 23] And that was entirely contrary to what God had commanded. So the horror and the inconsistency and the lack of rationality behind this was breathtaking.

But then sin is breathtaking, isn't it? And sin doesn't have any rationale behind it. It's the same when sin takes place in our lives.

You can't explain it. There's no excuse for it. There's no excuse for it. Oh, you can say what the circumstances were and that can sound all very logical. But there's no excuse for it. Because every time we sin, it's an act of betrayal.

It's an act in which we have turned away from worshipping and devoting ourselves to the living and true God.

And there's no rational explanation to it. So Moses was surrounded by this confusion. You remember what happened. First of all, there was his rage dropping the tablets of stone.

[8 : 27] Then there was the retribution in which plague came upon Israel. And it's at this moment when all chaos seems to have ensued throughout Israel that Moses takes refuge in God.

And that's not the first time he took refuge in God. Moses had learned from the very beginning. And when I say the very beginning, I mean only a matter of months ago since he met God in the flames of the burning bush.

But that experience was infectious. He never, ever lost sight of what it was to have an encounter with God in that way. Of what it was to hear the voice of God.

You see, what was for Israel a horrific experience was to Moses an absolute delight. Because Moses approached God in faith.

He knew. He rested. He took refuge in the covenant-keeping faithfulness of God. And no matter how God appeared, how fearsome God appeared, Moses knew in his heart of hearts that the Lord loved him.

[9 : 55] And that the Lord loved Israel with a covenant love. And he could rely on that love. What's more, it was an encounter that he wanted more of. Once he had it the first time, he only wanted more and more and more of this living and true God.

The God who had bound himself to his people. And he had bound himself with Moses, assuring him of his love. Now that didn't make Moses a perfect person.

We know that Moses was far from perfect. And yet Moses knew that his sins were covered.

And that underneath were the everlasting arms of the Lord who had connected himself. Who had united himself with Israel through this covenant.

And so in the midst of this chaos, there is order. The order of Moses speaking to God. In the midst of this darkness that was going on at the foot of the mountain, Moses finds once again the light of God.

[11:09] In the midst of this sinfulness, without any explanation, there is the holiness of God in which Moses takes refuge.

In which he finds delight. And in which Moses is forced to think eternally. In which Moses is forced to look up.

Upwards. It's not an escapism. You know, sometimes, you know, when things are chaotic in life around us, we, some people tend to escape.

For the sake of escaping. And you might think on first sight that this was Moses just escaping everything. And just trying to find solace somewhere. But that's not the way it was at all. He knew where to run to.

This wasn't just a running away. It was a running to God. Because there was the threat at that time. There was a suggestion being made at that time. That God was saying to Moses, Well, you carry on.

[12:11] You carry on leading the people. You carry on to the promised land. But I'm not going to go with you. And for Moses, this was utterly catastrophic. Even if the people of Israel were to have the protection of God, that wasn't enough for Moses.

Nothing satisfied Moses less than the actual presence of God himself. And you know, we can relate to this, can't we?

We can connect with this because this is a truth that runs all the way through the Bible. And it runs in the people of God, wherever they are.

This is something we can relate to because we have the presence of God. And nothing else can possibly satisfy us.

Despite our failures and our weaknesses and our sinfulness, We have the presence of God because he is here in his grace.

[13:13] Not just when we gather like this, But we are guaranteed that presence in the person of the Holy Spirit Who takes the things of Jesus and makes them known to us on a daily and a continuous basis.

That's the great privilege that belongs to us today. That wherever we go, God goes with us. And nothing else. Once having experienced that, once we've tasted that, Then nothing else satisfies us. And so we know what Moses felt, Or something of how he felt, In the midst of chaos. Because our life is sometimes chaotic as well.

It would take all morning to describe the kind of scenarios that may, That we may be in today. And it wouldn't be worthwhile. Because you know, You know the situation you're in this morning.

And perhaps you've come here today. And this is for you. Just a perfect time of peace and solace. But it's more than that.

[14:19] It's not just a time of peace. It's a time when we can be reminded, Together of the fellowship that we have with God. The truth that God has promised to us.

That he is our God. And that we are his people. That we are in covenant relationship with him. And that he has sent his son into the world. To be our savior. To never leave us.

Or never forsake us. So this was the best thing that Moses could ever have done. To retreat into the presence of God. And to take refuge in him.

He that doth in the secret place. Of the most high reside. Under the wings. Under the shade of. He that is the almighty. Shall abide.

That's what Moses is doing. He's turning away. And he's done it. He's done it often in the past. This is not the first time he's done this. Remember. The same chapter describes for us.

[15:17] As a kind of parenthesis. How Moses built a tabernacle. A special tabernacle. Now this is not the tabernacle that the priest made sacrifices in.

This was called the tent of meeting. And this was a private place. That Moses would go to outside the camp. And he would go to that place. And Joshua would go with him sometimes.

And this was the place specifically where he met with God. And where the pillar of cloud would come. And it would dwell on this particular location.

And Moses would speak to God. And God would speak to him. Remember that that's the most famous feature of Moses. It wasn't that he was the prince of Egypt. Most famous feature of Moses was that he knew God face to face.

That's what set him apart from every other person. He knew. He had an intimate knowledge of God. And he would deploy this by.

[16:18] He built this tent. This little tent. And he would go to that tent. And he would meet with God. And he would bring all the burdens. And all the complexities.

And all the stresses. And the responsibilities that lay upon him. He would just offload them to the Lord. And the Lord of course would answer him. And he would guide him.

And he would. I'm not sure what interaction there was. We don't know what was said. But we know that this happened. You can read about it earlier on in this chapter.

The same is true for every child of God. We have the same privilege. We know God face to face. As God's people. We have had an encounter with God.

The greatest possible encounter you can have. Is the encounter. In Jesus Christ. When a person comes to faith in Jesus. We come to know God as never before.

[17:16] In a new and a living way. We become children of God. We have a right to all the privileges. The catechism tells us that. We have a right to all the privileges. Of the children of God.

And we know him face to face. The problem is we don't make use of that. The problem is that. We don't have.

A place like Moses had. Or at least if we do. We don't make use of it. We neglect it. And perhaps we're coming here today.

And we're. We're discovering that as never before. How little use we make. Of the access. To the glory of God. That we have. That we possess on a daily.

And a minute by minute. And we don't. We. We suffer all of the chaos. Of us. Living in a sinful world. And all the perplexities. And the complexities. That life brings upon us.

[18:12] And very often. The last thing we do. Is to bring that to God. What's the first thing we need to do. And if this is an occasion. When we're reminded of that. Then so be it. If this is an occasion.

When. We go away from here. And we. Give God the first place. And we bring. Everything to the Lord. In prayer. Believing. That we have been called.

Into his presence. And that he has taken. An intense interest. In every aspect. Of our lives. So often. We bear. Such an intolerable burden.

Because we do not take it. To the Lord. In prayer. Isn't that true? At least it is for me anyway. I'm sure it is for many of us here. As well.

Well here is Moses. And he is coming. To take refuge. In the. In the Lord. And he is reminded. By asking God.

[19:09] To show him. Something of his glory. He is reminded. Of the sovereignty. The power. The changeless.

Power of God. And that power. Is focused. On his covenant. With his people. See it is one thing. To believe in the power. Of God. But if the power of God.

Is not focused. On us. Then it is useless. To us. But God has promised. That he. Has. Focused. All of himself.

On his people. What is the. The letter to the Hebrews. Says. That we have a high priest. Who ever lives. To make. Intercession. For. Us.

Have you ever thought of that. That right now. We have a high priest. The Lord Jesus Christ. Who sits at the right hand of God. In heaven. Who is making. Intercession.

[20:03] For us. For us. We are the subject. Of this great. Eternal. Conversation.

This heavenly conversation. That there is between the father. And the son. We are the subject. Because of his extraordinary love. For his people.

Let's reflect on. What we mean to God. Let's reflect on what God. Has given us. And what God has done for us. He's also.

Moses. This was also an occasion. Which. By seeing something. Of the glory of God. He's able to see the beauty. The goodness. The loveliness. The majesty.

Of the God. Who has pledged. To be. His savior. Well let's move on. We've asked. Why did Moses. Ask God. To. Show him.

[21 : 03] His glory. Second question is. What did Moses not see. When God showed him. The disclosure. Or the manifestation.

Of his glory. What did Moses not see. Well. He tells us. But he says. Verse 20. You cannot see. My face.

For man shall not see me. And live. So. The full force. Of God's splendor. Had to be hidden. From God.

From Moses. For his own protection. Moses was not. For his own protection. Moses was not able. To see. The full. Majesty. The full. Fullness. Of the glory.

Of God. And of course. The reason for that. Is because Moses. Is a sinner. And as such. There is. That. Element. Of separation. Even.

[21 : 59] In. In covenant fellowship. With God. There is still. Moses. Is still. A sinner. So there is. A not yet. About. Our relationship.

With God. Here. In this world. While we are in this world. And yet. This verse. Even this. Prohibition. Even in reflecting. On what Moses.

Is not. Allowed. To see. We are reminded. That. There is a promise. Given to us. That one day. We will see. That one day. When we.

Are brought. Before God. In. Sinlessness. In heaven. With resurrected.

Bodies. Souls. And bodies. Having been. Reunited. At the second coming. And brought into. The. The. The presence of God.

[22 : 52] In. Perfection. We will see him. As he is. And we will understand. So much more. I'm not sure. If we'll understand. Everything.

But we will understand. So much more. Than we understand. Today. And we will be. Rid. Once and for all. Of everything.

That restricts us. Everything. That weighs us. Down. The burdens. And the sorrows. And the. Disappointments. And the darkness.

And the shame. That. So often. Spoils. Our Christian witness. Our Christian witness. And our relationship. With God. There is a not yet.

About what we're doing today. We're continuously reminded. Of that. In the Bible. God. So God. God had to protect.

[23 : 47] Moses. From death. The death. That there would have been. If. He had seen. God. In his fullness. And nonetheless. One day.

There will be no need. For that protection. Because we will see him. As he is. So what did Moses see? That's the third question. What did Moses see?

Verse 23. You will see. My back. God said to him. There is a cleft. Of the rock. 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.

[24 : 44] Be seen. How would you understand this? What is the back. Of God? It's almost. You know. Even say that.

You think. Well this is. There is something irreverent. About. Talking about. The back. Of God. How can we talk about. The back. But these are God's words. It's God.

Who is describing himself. In these terms. So. These are. This is the infallible word of God. And he's describing himself. As having. A back.

What is. What does this mean? What did Moses see? Well we're not absolutely sure. What exactly he saw. But there's enough information in this.

When we. Approach it. In the light of the rest of the scriptures. To add some. To give us a better understanding.

[25 : 36] I think. Of what. Took place. On this occasion. First of all. God describes himself. As. Having a back.

Which Moses would see. As opposed to. Moses seeing his face. In other words. It was. In contrast. To seeing my face.

You will see my back. So there's a contrast. You can't see my face. No one can see my face. And live. But I will show you.

What can be seen. What is possible. Of me. To be seen. God doesn't have a back. God doesn't have a form. The Bible says. That God is invisible. He is spirit. So he can't. [26 : 36] So there is. So when he talks about. My back. He is. He is. Describing himself. In. What. Some people call. Anthropomorphic.

Language. Which means that. God sometimes reveals himself. In human terms. In order for us. To understand him. Like for example. When he says. The arm of the Lord. God doesn't have an arm. He doesn't have body parts. Like we do. He is spirit. He is invisible. And yet. When he talks about. The arm of the Lord. Being not shortened. That it cannot save. We know. What he means. By that. He is describing. His power. Particularly. In terms of. Salvation. When it says. That God walked. In the garden. In the cool of the day. In Genesis chapter 3. That doesn't mean. [27 : 28] He has legs. It means. That he is describing. Himself. In terms. That we can understand. That help us. To understand. The loveliness. Of the. Fellowship.

That there was. Between Adam and Eve. And God. Before the fall. And actually. Describes. That there was still. Interaction. Between God. And Adam and Eve. After the fall. By the way. If it wasn't for that. Then we would all be lost. So God describes himself. In anthropomorphic. Terms. And it's the same here. He's talking about. His back. In other words. He's describing. That which can be seen. Of God. And there are some times. When God. Made himself visible. In the. Old Testament. Like for example. Isaiah chapter 6. When Isaiah. [28 : 23] Saw the Lord. He says. I saw the Lord. High and lifted up. And the train of his robe. Filled the temple. Now God is visible. And yet. Isaiah sees him. And sees this.

Great. Awesome sight. That brings out. His sinfulness. As perhaps. Never before. So there are times. And occasions. When God makes himself visible. And he describes himself. In these terms. And this is one of them. God did this supremely. When he became. A human being. In the person. Of Jesus Christ. Because not only. Did he appear. In visible form. But he. Took on. A body. He took to himself. Not only a human body. But human nature. Becoming. God. And man. [29 : 21] In one person. The Lord Jesus Christ. Forever. And so. Whilst today. We can say that God. Himself. Is invisible.

Yet. The son of God. Is today visible. Because he continues. Sitting at the father's. Right hand. God. As one of us. He did not leave. His human nature. On the earth. When he ascended. To heaven. He. Took it with him. He's still. There today. As our great high priest. In our nature. As one of us. So he doesn't just. So when Jesus came into the world. God wasn't just. Putting on an appearance. It wasn't just. That he seemed. To become visible. He actually did. Take our nature. Upon himself. And he became visible. Because. [30 : 17] He was now. For the first time. Ever. In. History. He was now. God. And man. And he did that. As we know. For a very specific reason.

So that as. Man. He would die. As our representative. And as our sacrifice. So that he would give himself. Into the hands of men. And. Give himself into the hands of God. So that he would become sin. For us. And taking on our guilt. Upon himself. He would suffer. The wrath. That we so. Deserved. And that's why he says. He who has seen me. Has seen the father. And so why did God. Show Moses. His glory. That's the next question. Why did God do this? Because Moses asked for it.

[31 : 23] This was a simple answer. To prayer. This was Moses request. This was a request. I suppose. There was a million. There were a million things. That Moses could have asked for. Given all the complexity.

And all the chaos. That was going on around him. In Israel. There were so many million things. And yet. And I'm sure. That there are a million things. That you and I. Could ask God for. Today. When you think of all the people. That you're praying for. Right now. When you think of the people. In your family. That you're praying for. The people who are known to you. The people. Who are unconverted. That you're praying for. The people who you know. Who are going through difficult times. And the. The. The. The. The. Perplexing situations. That. That are going on in our lives.

And around us. And in our communities. And in our churches. And. There are a million things. We could come to God this morning. Asking for. But. Let's put them all aside.

[32 : 18] For an hour or so. And let's ask God. To show us his glory. Because. When he does. Everything else.

Falls into its own perspective. And we're reminded afresh. That God. Is on. The throne. And God. Is able.

And willing. To do more. Than we can ask. Or even think. And God. Is willing. And able. To work. All things. Together. For good.

To those. Who love him. And who are called. According to. His purpose. I'm not suggesting. That we escape.

Our troubles. But let's just. Turn aside from them. Just for a few moments. And let's. Rediscover. The greatness. And the majesty.

[33 : 14] Of God. You know. What that brings about. In our hearts. It brings a peace. In knowing. That God. Is for us. And if God. Is for us. Then who.

Can be. Against us. And we know. That God. Is for us. Because of. What he did. In the Lord. Jesus Christ. And what Jesus. Suffered. On the cross. We know. That is the final.

Proof. And we don't need. Any more proof. Than that. But I want to ask. One more question. And this brings us on to.

The passage. In. John. Chapter. Chapter 13. And it brings us on to. Our theme for the day. Which of course. Is the death. Of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We've already spoken about it. I want to ask this. One final question. And this is this. What. Did Moses. Hear. We've already asked.

[34 : 11] What did he see. And we've tried. To understand. We don't know. Exactly. What he saw. And perhaps. Some of us. I wish I had seen that. Well you're not going to see it.

Because it's not disclosed to us. What we do know. Is what. Moses heard. And I want to suggest to you. That what he heard. Is just as important.

As what he saw. And what he heard. Is the explanation. Of what he saw. And what he heard. Was the word of God. That extends all the way. Through the Bible. Through the Old Testament.

Into the New Testament. And that rests. In one place. In one place alone. Let's listen to what he. What he heard. Verse. Chapter 34. The beginning. Of this chapter.

And he says. Or rather. Sorry. I should have said. Verse 5. Verse 5. Chapter 34. Verse 5. The Lord is sending.

[35 : 08] Now this is all. This is all. A continuous story. There's no pause. Between 33 and 34. This is God. Continuing to answer. Moses to request. Show me your glory.

So what he's saying. Is just as much. A revelation. As what he's showing him. What he says. Is this. The Lord. Descended in the cloud. And stood with him there. And proclaimed.

The name of the Lord. Now. This is what he says. 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. For giving iniquity. And transgression. And sin. But.

Who. Will. By. No means. Clear. The guilty. You see the paradox. God is saying two things.

[36 : 04] First of all. He's declaring his faithfulness. And his love. And his compassion. And his salvation. His grace. But then. He's saying. At the same time.

That he. By no means. Will clear the guilty. How do these things. Fit together. These are two.

Contradictions. Because all. Have sinned. And come short. Of the glory of God. So if God. Is not going to show.

If he's not going to. Clear the guilty. And if we're all guilty. Then how is he going to show.

Compassion. And how is he going to show. Mercy. And what hope do any of us have.

Well there's only one answer. Isn't there. There's only one place. Where the answer is found. And that is. At the cross. Where.

[37 : 02] The son of God. Became. Sin. For us. He took. Our guilt. Upon. Himself. And God. Did.

Not. Clear him. He unleashed. His wrath. Upon his own. Beloved son.

So that. He could keep. Steadfast love. For thousands. So that. He could extend.

His gracious. Steadfast love. And faithfulness. To people like us. And that is why I believe.

And this is what. Jesus meant. I believe. When he said. In John 13. We read it together. When Judas. Finally left. The company of the disciples. To go off. Into the night.

[37 : 59] Jesus said. Now. Is. The son. Of man. Glorified. See the connection. Now.

Is the son of man. Glorified. God. Was. Ultimately. Glorified. In the death. Of his son. Do you want to see God's glory today?

Let's go to Calvary. Where. The son of. The spotless. Sinless. Perfect son of God.

Become sin for us. So that we. Might become the righteousness. Of God. In him. Let's pray.

Amen. Amen.