



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 22– STUDY QUESTIONS EXODUS 33:7-11, 18-23; 34:5-9, 29-35

DAY ONE

1. What thoughts from the reflection, commentary or questions had a personal message for you this week?

Read Exodus 33:7-9

2. Our lesson last week ended as Moses returned to the Israelites' camp after receiving the stone tablets of the covenant from God. Recall what he found when he arrived.

NOTE: The commentary skips from Exodus 32:21 to 33:6. Following are the main points covered in those verses:

- **The interchange between Moses and Aaron about the golden calf**
- **The punishment for those who chose not to re-commit themselves to the Lord and Moses' leadership**
- **The ordination of the tribe of Levi as priests**
- **Moses' return to God on Mt. Sinai to make atonement for the sin of the Israelites**
- **God's command for the people to leave Sinai and resume their journey to the Promised Land**

3. Where did Moses pitch the “tent of meeting” and for what reason did the people go out to this tent, according to verse 7?

NOTE: As Moses and the Israelites made their way through the desert, seeking the Promised Land, they camped at intervals and lived in tents. Each family had its own tent, and there was also a meeting tent.

4a. What did the people do when Moses went out to the tent of meeting? Give a complete answer (verse 8).

b. What could the significance of this action be?

5a. According to verse 9, describe what happened when Moses entered the tent.

b. What do you remember about the pillar of cloud from earlier in this study?

6. CONNECTION: Even though, we know that our God is a merciful God, always willing to forgive us when we confess our sins and repent, nonetheless, there are always consequences for sin. The Israelites have sinned as a people. Moses intercedes for them and obtains God's mercy, but the consequence remains. God will continue to be present to them, but at a certain distance. Only Moses has the privilege of speaking to Him "face to face". The consequence of sin is separation from God. When we sin, we, too, are distanced from God. Recall a time when you felt far from God. What was the reason and how did you feel? How were you able to reconcile with Him?

Read and record Acts 3:19. Through repentance and the cross of Jesus, we can be reconciled to God; brought back into a full relationship with Him.

DAY TWO

Read Exodus 33:10-11

7. When the people saw the pillar of cloud at the entrance of the meeting tent, they knew that God was there with Moses. This led them to pray. What words from verse 10 indicate that they were praying?

8a. According to verse 11, God spoke to Moses on these occasions. What two phrases describe the way God spoke to Moses?

b. Who else was allowed to go with Moses into the tent and what do we learn about him in verse 11? (Give a complete answer.)

9a. Read the beautiful intercessory prayer prayed by Moses for the Israelites in Exodus 33:12-16, which was not included in the readings this week. He calls on God's favor and friendship. He reminds God that these are His people. For what does Moses plead and for what reason, according to verses 15-16? Summarize in your own words.

b. What is the Lord's response in Exodus 33:17?

10. Jesus, too, desires a close, personal relationship with us. Read and record a phrase from John 15:15 that expresses this desire.

11a. Read Sirach 6:14-16. Record the phrase that most describes a faithful friend to you?

b. Explain how the phrase you recorded could apply to your friendship with Jesus.

12. CONNECTION: Years before Jesus was born, the book of Sirach described the role of a faithful friend. Later, in Jesus' own time, he called his disciples "friends." But, many years before either Sirach or Jesus walked the earth, Moses was meeting God face to face as a friend. God desires to be your friend. He yearns to meet with you "face to face". Where, when and how do you meet with God "face to face"? What benefits do you receive from these intimate encounters?

Read and record Jesus' words in John 14:23. Let these words rest in your heart as you pray today.

DAY THREE
Read Exodus 33:18-23

13a. In last week's study Moses boldly asked God to spare the Israelites. God relented and they were spared. This display of God's mercy made Moses even bolder. Moses is speaking to God. What does he pray, according to verse 18?

b. What might this mean?

14a. What is God's response to Moses' request (beginning of verse 19)?

b. Read 1 Kings 19:9-13. Briefly record what you learn about Elijah.

15. Moses and Elijah are the only two people in Scripture who were allowed to see God directly. Why might it be significant that these two men were present on Mt. Tabor at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-7)?

16a. God continues speaking in verse 19. What does God say about His graciousness and His mercy?

b. How do you think this relates to the beginning of verse 19?

17a. In verse 20, God adds a restriction to Moses' request. What is it?

b. How will Moses be protected, according to verses 21-22?

18a. According to verse 23, what will God then do?

b. What will Moses be allowed to see and what will not be seen?

19. CONNECTION: Because of the sin(s) committed by God's people, humankind is no longer allowed to see His face. Instead, we can see the places where God has been. We can see His presence in the things He has created and the works He has performed. Describe a time this week when you were able to see a place where God passed by.

Read and record the first sentence of Romans 1:20. Pray today that you will be able to see the glory of God in the tracks He leaves behind in the world.

DAY FOUR

Read Exodus 34:5-6

20. In verses 1-4 of chapter 34, (which were not included in the readings) Moses again ascends the mountain to receive a second set of laws. The Lord told Moses to cut two tablets of stone, like the former ones and God would then write the same words on them as He had written on the tablets Moses broke. Moses cut the tablets and went up on Mt. Sinai as the Lord commanded him to do. According to verse 5, God did three things. List them here.

21. In verse 6, God repeats His name and describes Himself. Record the description He gives of Himself.

22. What do you think God is trying to reveal to Moses about His character by using these words to describe Himself?

23. Through Jesus, God is made manifest to us. Try to recall from Scripture an example where Jesus showed each of the following traits.

Mercy:

Graciousness:

Slowness to anger:

Abounding in Steadfast Love:

Faithfulness:

24. CONNECTION: As we study the oftentimes harsh and wrathful portrayals of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is good and reassuring to keep in mind that in these verses we are also given a picture of the God of mercy and love. When Jesus lived on the earth, He manifested these godly traits. He came to give us a loving and tender image of God our Father. Look at the previous question and choose the character trait of God that has a particular meaning for you. Which one did you choose and why?

Read and record John 3:16. Let thoughts of our God's love, tenderness and mercy lead you into prayer.

DAY FIVE
Read Exodus 34:7-9

25. In today's passage we continue to read of God's steadfast love. What do you learn about this steadfast love in the beginning of verse 7?

26. What is the benefit of God's steadfast love (verse 7)?

27a. Record the dictionary definition for each of the following words that best applies in these verses.

Iniquity:

Transgression:

Sin:

b. What, if any, differences do you detect in the meanings of these words and why might all three be included in this verse?

28a. In your own words, what does verse 7 say about “the guilty”?

b. What will be the consequence of their sins?

29a. What attributes of God do you see in verse 7?

b. Why is it good for God to have these character traits, as well as those we learned of in verse 6?

30a. Once again, Moses prayed. According to verse 8, in what position did he pray?

b. What do you find significant about the posture Moses assumed before God?

31. In verse 9, Moses’ prayer sums up earlier petitions he has made in behalf of his people. Record the three requests of Moses’ prayer.

NOTE: Verses 10-27 of chapter 34, repeat much of what we studied when the covenant was given to Moses the first time. The commandments were to teach the people the ways God would have them live, to keep them separate as a holy people and to direct their worship.

32. CONNECTION: Even after all he has been through, Moses still continues to pray for his stiff-necked people. There seems to be no end to his love for them, and he seems to be relentlessly loyal. Who in your life needs your undying love and relentless loyalty in spite of a “stiff neck?” Remember Moses’ fierce love and loyalty. Briefly describe this person and the difficult situation you have or are encountering with him/her. (No names need be mentioned.)

Read and record Numbers 12:3. Following Moses' example, write a prayer for the stiff-necked people in your life.

DAY SIX

Read Exodus 34:29-35

33a. As this passage opens, Moses is descending from Mt. Sinai for the last time. What was he carrying?

b. Describe how he looked and the reason for his appearance.

34. According to verse 30, how did Aaron and the Israelites react to Moses and why?

35a. What was Moses' response and what effect did this have on the people (verses 31-32)?

b. What did Moses give the people at the end of verse 32?

36. What did Moses then do to keep from frightening the people (verse 33)?

37. In your own words, describe Moses' use of the "veil" according to verses 34-35.

38. CONNECTION: Just as close contact with God caused Moses' face to shine, we too can be affected by prayer and close contact with God. If we spend time with God, people should be able to see the difference in us. The love of God should shine in our lives and be shown in good works and loving words and actions. We should NEVER deny or hide our love for God, but like Moses, we may sometimes need to tone down or "veil" anything that might be offensive or drive others away from what is too much for them. Recall a time in your life when your over-zealous words or behavior was a bit too much for someone. Record some details here.

Read and record James 3:13. Today, pray for the grace to share your faith and love for God with others in a way that will attract them to God.



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 22- COMMENTARY
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EXODUS 33: 7-11, 18-23; 34:5-9, 29-35

Exodus 33:7-9

Chapter 33 opens with the dismissal of the people from the holy mountain of Sinai [Deuteronomy 1:6]. At first, this dismissal, immediately following the incident with the golden calf and the plague of punishment [32:35], seems to be a kind of rejection or exclusion. The people mourn and remove all their jewelry; the LORD says *I will not go in your midst* [33:3]. A closer look reveals that the painful separation from the holy place is a hopeful gift. The people are sent off to resume their journey into the promised Land. YHWH promises an *angel*, a powerful emissary who will guard and lead the people on behalf of YHWH. In Lesson 5 we learned that such an *angel* is the spiritual presence of God, who is too holy to be seen or to move openly among human beings. The holiness of YHWH is incompatible with the stubbornness and unbelief of the Israelites. God will not display his glory, but he will still be with them.

In a similar way, the lack of gold ornaments indicates that the people are ready to travel and do battle. They may not linger at the foot of Sinai as though they have already reached their goal. They are purified and simplified, as when they first left Egypt. The gold would only tempt them to fashion some kind of idol again. The spiritual presence of God will be symbolized in another way: a tent of meeting.

The tent tradition is very ancient among the Israelites. It seems to come from the Elohist source, not the Priestly source that describes the elaborate Dwelling of chapters 25-27. In line with the purely spiritual nature of Israel's God, the tent is simply that: a simple shelter. There is no mention of anything in it or in front of it: no altar or shrine or image of any kind. It is a holy place, not a holy thing.

*Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; thus it was regarded a holy, separate from common affairs. It is a kind of hermitage, a quiet place apart. Moses called it the tent of meeting (in Hebrew, *ohel mo-ed*).*

The text seems to blend two traditions here. One is that *everyone who sought the LORD*

would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp: suggesting that God's holy presence is accessible to any of the holy people. The other tradition speaks of *Moses* going out to the tent, as representative. This occasion calls forth reverence from the people: they would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. Moses' approach to the tent replicates his going up the holy mountain of Sinai, enveloped in *cloud*. Only Moses speaks with YHWH.

These two traditions represent the two sides of the divine-human relationship, two aspects which are always in tension. The first is the immanence, or nearness of God. This aspect knows God as one who lives among the people, in the heart of every woman and man. Religions which emphasize God's immanence tend to be personal and simple. The second is the transcendence, or otherness of God. God is not to be taken for granted; only the holy may approach him. Religions which tend to emphasize God's transcendence also emphasize some kind of mediation: a prophet to speak for God, a priesthood to worship God. The simple tent which anyone can approach signals the immanent God; the uniqueness of Moses and the sign of the cloud symbolize God's transcendence.

Christians treasure John 1:14, which explains that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*, literally, "pitched his tent among us" *and we have seen his glory*. Both the holiness and nearness of God are revealed in the person of Jesus.

Exodus 33:10-11

Today's verses describe more fully the reverence shown by the Israelites to the sign of God's presence, *the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent*. This does not mean that they are worshipping their own tents but that, standing outside, they bow down toward the meeting tent.

When the Jews had been exiled from their Promised Land, they continued to turn toward the Temple in Jerusalem when they prayed [Daniel 6:11; I Kings 8:46-51], a custom that was also observed when they returned. The ancient synagogue where Jesus prayed and taught in Capernaum has its doorway toward Jerusalem, so that the congregation could face the Temple when they prayed.¹

We are also given a simple yet luminous description of the relationship of YHWH and Moses. They *used to speak ... face to face, as one speaks to a friend*. No better words could be found to explain the gracious immanence of God [John 15: 14-15]. The next verse shows that this

¹ Some early Christians used to pray facing east, not so much toward Jerusalem, as to expect the second coming of Christ [Luke 1:78]; this led to the custom of "orienting" churches, that is, building them with the altar at the east end. Muslims, also, pray facing Mecca, the holy city of their prophet Mohammed.

profound relationship has captivated Moses' *young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, who would not leave the tent*. Joshua is already seen as a worthy successor to Moses, the friend of YHWH.

Exodus 33:12-17 records one of Moses' intimate conversations with YHWH. Moses reminds God that God knows Moses *by name*, and Moses has *found favor*. He then asks to know the *ways* of YHWH so that he *may know* God, and asks for consideration for the people. Moses also requests YHWH to travel with them, for if he does not, the people will be no different from any other nation, whose gods remain aloof from them.

Exodus 33:18-23

People in love want to know everything about the one they love. Here *Moses* asks to see into the heart of God: *"Show me your glory,² I pray."* YHWH gently reminds Moses that this is impossible: *you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.³* At the same time, YHWH is willing to reveal *all [his] goodness... and will proclaim before you the name, YHWH*. In other words, the goodness of God and the Holy Name is all that humans need to know. The next verses remind us that concepts and attributes do not encompass God, just as words cannot adequately define another's personhood. God remains totally free and absolutely sovereign; yet Israel's God is dependable, faithful and loving: *I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*.

In a striking metaphor, YHWH protects Moses from too much divine glory by putting him *in a cleft of the rock*. God says: *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*. Of course, God has neither face, nor hand, nor back. The infinite One cannot be so contained. This verse is meant to stimulate our imagination. To look someone in the face is to give that person our full attention, especially if we look into the other's eyes. If we know someone well, one glance at the face tells all. We also say that the eyes are the windows of the soul because they reveal what is going on inside the person. Moses would not be able to "see God's face" in this sense because no man can comprehend God.

We know what God does for us and with us rather than who God is. The Bible often uses the synecdoche "hand of God" to represent God, especially God's mighty works and providence [3:20; 8:19; 15:6; Job 2:10; Psalm 118:15-16; Luke 11:20]. As for God's back, Isaiah reports a vision of YHWH in which his train of his garment (NRSV: *hem of his robe*) filled the Temple [Isaiah 6:1]. Sometimes it only after God has passed through our lives that we realize God's presence. We recognize God's back, the train of his garment, the aftermath of God's power among us.

² For more on the Hebrew concept of glory, see Lesson 13.

³ This concept was discussed in Lesson 5.

Exodus 34:5-6

In this section it is as though we have returned to the burning bush, where YHWH first *proclaimed the name*, “YHWH.” God has fulfilled that original promise [3:12]. Much more is being revealed to us at this time: the very nature of God. Jewish tradition knows them as the thirteen attributes of God.

The first two attributes are the divine Name: YHWH, YHWH. Why the repetition? A simple answer is that in the Old Testament, names or titles are repeated to emphasize them (as in *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD* [Isaiah 6:3] or express some urgency (as in the call of Abraham [Genesis 22:11] or of Moses [3:4]). What is being emphasized here? Jewish tradition holds that the divine Name YHWH symbolizes God’s mercy. The repetition of this name reminds us that God is merciful both before and after we sin. God does not change; humans do.

The third attribute is: *God* (in Hebrew, *EI*). The One who rescued from Egypt, the partner of the covenant, is the almighty One, the ruler of the universe.

The fourth attribute is: *merciful*. The Hebrew word is *rachum*, “compassionate,” similar to the word *racham*, “to show love for” and having the same root as *rechem*, “a mother’s womb.” God feels our pain and suffering, just as a mother suffers the pain of her child.

The fifth attribute is *gracious*, a lovely word denoting kindness, warmth and hospitality.

The sixth attribute is *slow to anger*, so that the sinner has an opportunity to repent [2 Peter 3:8-9]. God is slow to anger and quick to forgive; most of those created in the divine image are quite the opposite!

The seventh attribute is *abounding in steadfast love*, in Hebrew, *rav chesed*, “much loving-kindness.” *Chesed* is one of those great Hebrew terms that we have no adequate translation for. It literally means a “bond,” just like the Latin word *religio*. *Chesed* is a bond of friendship, loyalty and unity. *Chesed* is a betrothal pledge. In marriage, *chesed* is the love which binds a husband and wife together. The prophet Hosea uses *chesed* to signify the tenderness of God for his people, and God’s refusal to let go of them even when they sin [Hosea 2:19]. YHWH is rich in *chesed* for us.

The eighth attribute is *faithfulness*, in Hebrew, *emet*, “truth.” This is truth, not in the sense of an abstract statement or principle, but as translated here, “being true to someone.” God is faithful, loyal, dependable, and authentic. No one need ever fear being forsaken by God. YHWH is as rich in faithfulness as he is in loving kindness.

Exodus 34:7-9

The ninth of the thirteen attributes of God is: *keeping steadfast love (chesed) for the thousandth generation*. A *thousand generations* is the Hebrew way of saying “forever,” “for eternity.” Jewish tradition understands this verse to mean that God remembers and rewards human merit. All the good that we do is important to God, for it displays our *chesed* to the One who first loves us.

The next three attributes are: *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*, which symbolize the root, branch and fruit of sin. God forgives our inclination to evil, the stubbornness by which we justify our actions to ourselves, and the guilt which is the penalty for our wrongdoing. This sense of a complete eradication of sin is explicit in the Christian doctrine of sanctifying grace [Romans 5:1-11 and 8:1-30].

The thirteenth attribute is: *yet by no means clearing the guilty*, or, “does not remit all punishment.” Belief in an infinitely merciful God is sometimes perverted into an excuse for sin [Romans 6:1]. This final attribute reminds us that we are accountable for our sins. Indeed, the greater our consciousness of God’s love the greater will be the pain we feel because of our sins. The traditional image of fire (purifying in the case of purgatory, punishment in the case of hell) is the fire of the passion of God for us. For the saint, this fire is ecstasy, a blaze of glory; for the sinner, God’s stubborn love provokes anguish in us. Sin truly is its own punishment.

It is our own inclination to evil (*iniquity*) that we pass on to *children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation*. By word and example, in spite of our best efforts, we train our little ones in godless ways.

At the revelation of this glory, this deep insight into the nature of YHWH, *Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped*. Moses then puts his friendship with God on the line: “*If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.*” Moses risks everything for his Israelite people.

A Jewish *midrash*, or explanatory story, says that Moses argued with God: “Do you not remember that Israel learned idolatry in the land of idolaters, and who put them there but You!” So God made a new covenant with Israel and gave Moses a second set of tablets.

As in Lessons 18 and 19, the Commandments will be studied separately from the story of Moses receiving them. We now move ahead to verse 29, and continue the narrative.

Exodus 34:29-35

The encounter of Moses and YHWH on Mount Sinai comes to an end but their profound friendship does not. Two symbols of their relationship are given. First, Moses brings a renewed covenant, *the two tablets... in his hand*. Second, Moses has changed in appearance: *the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God*. We sometimes notice a person's face being radiant in times of happiness; "to make one's face shine" is a Biblical way of saying "to smile with approval" [Numbers 6:25]. Moses face, however, must have shone with a distinctive light, for *Aaron and all the Israelites... were afraid to come near him*. Moses has an aura of holiness which inspires awe in the people. This event is sometimes called the "transfiguration of Moses."

The Hebrew word describing the "radiant" face of Moses is *qaran*; this is related to *qeren*, a word which means "horn (of an animal)." In his Latin translation of the Bible, St. Jerome took it in this latter sense and wrote that Moses' face was "horned" (*cornuta*). This is why the famous statue of Moses by Michelangelo depicts Moses with horns on his head. It does not take much to imagine how this image was later used by enemies of the Old Covenant and of the Jewish people.

Moses knows full well that his wonderful conversation with YHWH is not for himself; the grace of transforming union with God is not a private possession. Moses takes the occasion to bring the people closer to God. He *spoke with them ...and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai*. Even with the engraved tablets in his hand, Moses speaks, because the word of YHWH is a living and personal word.

Why does Moses hide his glowing face? In some ancient religions, the priest would wear a mask or headdress representing the deity, so as to speak to the believers in the name of the god rather than in his own name. It is possible that some of the prophets of Israel veiled themselves while prophesying for the same reason. It is customary among some Jews to cover their eyes when reciting their profession of faith *Shema, Yisroel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad* ("Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone"), symbolizing that faith is by hearing and obeying God's word, not by seeing [John 20:29; Romans 10:17]. Orthodox Jewish priests (the *kohanim*)⁴ cover their hands and faces with their *tallit* (fringed prayer shawl) while pronouncing the Blessing of Aaron; it is the LORD who gives the blessing, not the individual priest.

In this story, Moses unveils his face whenever he goes *in before the LORD to speak with him, ... and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded*, so that it is actually Moses' shining face, not the veil, that represents the authority of God. Moses, the great prophet and intermediary between YHWH and Israel, covers himself when he is not

⁴ See note in Lesson 12.

serving in this capacity. It is as though Moses the man means nothing; Moses the prophet and teacher is everything.

In 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, St. Paul refers to the veil of Moses. He says that Moses covered his face so that the Israelites would not see the fading of the light in his face. The fact that the light faded means that the Old Testament was a temporary covenant, to be replaced by the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Paul also says that the veil denotes the lack of understanding on the part of the Israelites; in Christ all things are made plain and the veil is finally removed.

Our next lesson will consider Exodus 34:10-28, the “other” Ten Commandments.