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Bible Study: Exodus 33:12-23 — "Show Me Your Glory"

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Bible Readings

- **Exodus 33:12-23:** Moses seeks God's presence, his ways, and to see his glory; God graciously reveals his goodness and mercy

Bible Study

Hello, and welcome. Whether you're watching on your own, with your family, or with a few friends, I'm really glad you're here.

Today we're looking at one of the most remarkable conversations in the whole Bible: Exodus chapter 33, verses 12 to 23. It's a conversation between Moses and God, and it's full of bold, honest prayer.

Before we start, let me ask you a question to think about. Think of someone whose company you'd rather have than any present they could give you. A parent, a friend, a husband or wife. Why is it that just being with them matters more than anything they could hand you? Hold onto that thought. Because today we meet a man who was offered almost everything he could want, and he said: it isn't enough, unless God himself comes too.

To understand this passage, we need to know what has just happened. God has rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. He's brought them through the Red Sea, fed them in the desert, and led them to Mount Sinai. There, God makes a covenant with them. He promises to be their God, and they promise to be his people. God gives Moses plans for a tabernacle, a tent where God himself will live among them.

Then comes chapter 32. While Moses is up the mountain receiving these plans, the people get impatient. They melt down their gold, make a calf, and bow down to it. Within weeks of promising to worship God alone, they've broken the very first commandment.

At the start of chapter 33, God says something devastating: "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up among you." He will still send an angel ahead to clear the way, but he will not go himself. Now imagine being offered that. Freedom, a land flowing with milk and honey, protection on the journey. Everything you ever wanted, except God.

The remarkable thing is, the people mourn. They take off their jewellery. Somehow they realise that the promised land without God isn't really good news at all.

We're told that Moses used to meet with God in a tent outside the camp, and that "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." So the question hanging over our passage is: will God go with his people, or not? And that's where Moses starts to pray.

Listen out for what Moses asks God for. There are three requests, and each one is bolder than the last. First, "show me your ways." Second, "If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here." And third, the boldest of all, "Please show me your glory." And three times, God says yes.

Moses begins by reminding God of what God has already said to him: "Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.'" That's how Moses prays: he takes God's own promises and holds them up to him. He's about to lead a couple of million people through the desert. You'd expect him to ask for a map, or a strategy, or more help. Instead he says: "Please show me your ways, so that I may know you."

Moses doesn't just want information about the journey. He wants to know the God he's travelling with. He wants a relationship, not just directions. And God's answer is beautiful: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Not a plan, but a person. God himself will go, and with him comes rest.

So often we pray for the plan rather than for God himself. "Lord, sort out this job. Lord, fix this situation. Lord, tell me what to do." Those are good prayers. But Moses shows us something deeper: the greatest answer to prayer is not getting what we want, but getting more of God.

Moses presses further: "If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here." He's standing in the desert. Ahead of him is the land God promised: fields, vineyards, homes, security. And he says, "I'd rather stay here, in the dust and the heat, with you, than go into the promised land without you."

Then he gives his reason: "For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." What makes God's people different? It isn't that they're better behaved; the golden calf proved that. It's this: God is with them. His presence is their identity.

Notice one more thing. Moses keeps saying us. "Go with us. Your people." These are the same people who have just let God down, and let Moses down. Moses could have asked God to go with him alone. Instead he stands with them, and prays for them. And God says: "I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name."

For us today, that's a searching question. What would mark us out? Is it our church, our home, our own life? Is it our activity, our programmes, our reputation? Or is it that God is genuinely among us?

And now Moses makes his boldest request of all: "Please show me your glory." He's already spoken with God as a friend. He's already been promised God's presence. And still he wants more. He wants to see God as he really is.

Listen carefully to God's answer, because it's both generous and protective. First, it's generous. God says: "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord.'" Moses asks for glory, and God answers with his goodness. God's glory isn't just raw power or blinding light. At its heart, God's glory is his goodness, his character. And then God says what that character is: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." His glory is grace. Mercy he gives freely, to people who don't deserve it. People like a nation that has just bowed down to a golden calf. People like you and me.

Second, it's protective. God says, "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." God is so holy, so overwhelmingly glorious, that no sinful human being could take in the full sight of him and survive. So God does something tender: "See, 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 be seen."

Picture that. The almighty God hiding his friend in the rock and shielding him with his own hand, so that Moses can see as much of God as he can bear, and no more. That's what God is like. He's holy, and we can't simply march into his presence on our own terms. But he longs to be known, and he makes a way for us to come close, safely.

God keeps his promise in the very next chapter. In Exodus 34, he passes before Moses on the mountain and proclaims his name: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

But the story doesn't stop there. Centuries later, John begins his gospel by echoing this exact passage: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." The Greek word behind "lived among us" literally means "pitched his tent," just like the tabernacle.

Then he adds: "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Moses asked to see God's glory, and he saw it only from behind, hidden in the rock. But in Jesus, God has shown us his face. As Paul puts it, God's glory is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 17, Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain and is transfigured, shining with glory. And who's standing there talking with him? Moses. The man who once asked to see God's glory, and was told he couldn't see God's face, finally gets to look on the face of God, in Jesus. And for us, Jesus is our rock. We are hidden in him. Because of the cross, we can come into God's presence, not destroyed by his holiness, but covered by his grace.

As we finish, let me leave you with three questions to take into your week.

First: Seeking God himself. Moses prayed, "show me your ways, so that I may know you."
Why not pray that every day this week, and see what God does with it?

Second: Going nowhere without him. Is there a decision or situation ahead of you where you need to pray, "Lord, if you don't go with me, don't send me"?

Third: Praying for others. Moses prayed for people who had just let him down. Who could you stand alongside in prayer this week?