

## FINDING FAVOUR WITH THE LORD

Exodus 33: 12-23 raises a series of interesting questions. Among them is "What does it mean to find favour with the Lord." First, it is very clear that sinful actions can mean a loss of the Lord's favour. Although the first of the commandments God had recently given the Israelites was that He wanted His chosen people to worship only Him, the people had worshipped the golden calf that Aaron had made. It was flagrant disobedience. To make it worse, they had worshipped it as the Lord. Severe consequences followed. Many Israelites were put to the sword by their fellow Israelites, and the Lord was angry. They were out of His favour.

Moses asked the Lord to forgive them, but forgiveness was not going to come easily. Moses even offered to have his own name blotted out of the Lord's book if that would help them. Obviously that was not a possibility. No mere human being, even Moses, could redeem his fellows. The Lord threatened that what they had done meant a withdrawal of His favour to them, and that meant that, although they would still go to the land flowing with milk and honey, to the promised land of Canaan, He Himself would not go there with them. Only His Angel would go with them. He told Moses, "I shall not go up among you, because you are a stubborn people, and I might destroy you on the way." The Hebrew word for "you": in that threat is singular. The threat meant that Moses would also suffer because of the people's disobedience. The Lord also threatened that when the time came He would punish the Israelites for their sin. While they were still at Mount Sinai a plague came and many died. The people knew their disobedience had put them out of favour with the Lord. They watched nervously as Moses went out to the tent of meeting outside the camp,

Moses was worried at this threat of the withdrawal of the Lord's favour. An angel was no substitute for God's presence, and God had not informed Moses whom He would send with the Israelites. Then we see something very remarkable. Moses bases his entreaty on God's own assurance to him, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in My sight." This is the second point. The Lord began to relent when Moses entreated Him on that basis. He conceded: "My Presence will go with you." However, the "you" is still in the singular.

The assurance of the Lord's favour was Moses' bargaining chip. He used it again. "How will anyone know that Your people and I have found favour in Your sight unless You go with us?" Moses insisted on including the people of Israel in the Lord's favour. That was the only thing that distinguished them from every other nation on earth. Even if the Israelites had had a special claim on the Lord's favour (which they did not), they had lost it by their idolatry and stubborn disobedience. The Lord's reason for changing from anger to grace was that Moses had found favour in His sight and that He knew him by name. It depends solely on the Lord.

What is meant in finding favour with the Lord become clearer in Moses request, "Cause me to know Your way". God answered that prayer shortly afterwards when He revealed His glory to Moses on Mount Sinai while He spoke words that revealed His character as the Lord. He is gracious, merciful, and compassionate. It becomes clearer still that finding favour in the Lord's sight is not a matter of earning His favour in any way. It depends on the Lord's prior gracious choice to know someone by name and on His nature as a forgiving God, because He would rather forgive than punish.

Moses' request "Show me Your glory" has the appearance of trying to push the Lord's goodwill too hard. God granted His request, hid him in a split in the rock on Mount Sinai, and held His hand over his face while He passed by. As He passed by, Moses heard the words, "The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unending mercy and truth, who preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin." His name "the LORD" revealed His character. The expression "slow to anger" is literally, in Hebrew, "long in the nostrils". It takes Him a long time to get "steamed up".

God made it clear, however, that there were limits. He is still a God who punishes sin down to the fourth generation when people continue to be disobedient. His favour can be lost. He is both a God of wrath and a God of grace.

There are also two other limit that affect the fullness of revelation as far as the Old Testament is concerned, and as far as sinful human beings are concerned in this present existence. No human being can see Him and live. That seems to contradict what we are told elsewhere, that the seventy elders did go up on Mount Sinai and saw the Lord. However, though the text says that they saw Him, it is evident that they did not dare to look at His face. What follows is only a description of the pavement under His feet. Moses was permitted to see the Lord's back, but the sight of the LORD's face was denied him. All people have sinned they have fallen short of the glory of God, and are regularly filled with fear and alarm in the presence of God's glory, even in the presence of one of His angels.

God was going to add to His revelation in the time of the New Testament. It was through His revelation of Himself, as a God of grace and truth, through His own Son. John wrote, about the incarnate Jesus, "We have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son, who came from the Father." That was the ultimate showing of His favour. Even Moses was going to see more. He was privileged to see Jesus in glory and speak with Him, together with Elijah and three of Jesus' disciples, while Jesus spoke about the "exodus" that He would accomplish in Jerusalem.

Seeing God's face is reserved for the age to come, when the believers will be like their Lord Jesus, and see Him as He is.

God's revelation of Himself involved great condescension. There was not only grace and compassion when punishment might have been expected, but God condescended to reveal Himself in ways that were familiar to human beings. The account of His revelation of glory to Moses uses anthropomorphic expressions, the Lord's "hand", His "back", and His "face". There are real dangers in trying to strip away such human ways of referring to God, even though He has no body. Those who do end up with the kind of God the philosophers have. Their god is one who by definition is incapable of change, a god who cannot forgive, who cannot even be involved with this sinful world or impinge on it in any way, because that would distress him, and distress would mean change or him!

So what does it mean to find favour with the Lord? It is all a matter of His own revelation of Himself as a gracious and compassionate God. Though people may fall out of His favour and incur His wrath and punishment, remaining in His favour is not a matter of behaving oneself and earning His favour by good conduct. The fullness of New Testament revelation says that God's gracious, justifying verdict means that He credits sinful people with a righteousness that is not their own, the obedience of their Substitute Jesus Christ. That is the ultimate condescension. It is far more than that God expressed Himself in human terms, in anthropomorphisms. It is the startling, scandalous message that, to rescue the world that had gone terribly wrong. The Creator Himself entered His creation and became part of it. In grace the eternal Son did not only become a human being, but a poor, despised, and suffering one. He lowered himself to endure the most painful death by public execution that human beings have devised. He not only knew about suffering, but took on Himself the evil, the suffering, and the death of this world, which had become futile because of sin and death. His was the ultimate in condescension, that we might find favour with God.