

Moses' Three Requests after the Worship of the Golden Calf

The Old Testament reading Exodus 33:12-23 tells us what happened after the Israelites worshipped the golden calf. The LORD struck the people with a plague, and threatened that He would wipe from His book those who had sinned against Him. He said: "I shall not go up among you, because you are a stubborn people. Otherwise, I might annihilate you on the way." Nevertheless, when He told Moses to lead the people away from Sinai, He promised that "His Messenger" would go before them instead.

The section contains three requests by Moses, introduced by "Moses said", and the LORD then replied to each request.

Moses did not want to lead the people without the assurance of God's own Presence. He first asked that God's "Presence" (Hebrew: "face") would graciously go with the people. The glorious presence of God distinguished Israel from all the other nations. Other nations had false gods, and their own laws, priests, and sacrifices. Only Israel had the Presence, or Face, of God among them.

Moses interceded on behalf of the nation by reminding God that they were His people. He said to the LORD, "Look, You have been telling me, 'Lead these people up', but You have not let me know whom You will send with me. You have also said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in My sight.' Now therefore, please, if I have found favour in Your sight, cause me to know Your way, so that I may know You, and find favour in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people."

In response the LORD reversed His threat not to go with them. He answered, "My Presence will go with you, and I shall give you rest."

Secondly, Moses asked the LORD to confirm that He would indeed go with His people. If God's Face, or Presence did not go with the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land Moses said that there would be a serious problem for their reputation and even for God's reputation. "If Your Presence is not going with us, do not make us go up from here. How will anyone ever know that Your people and I have found favour in Your sight unless You go with us? Then we, Your people and I, shall be distinct from every other nation on the face of the earth."

Again God agreed to Moses' request. God's favour is not something that anyone can deserve or earn. It is unmerited and the greatest possible thing for any person. The LORD answered: "I shall also do these things, which you have asked, because you have found favour in My sight, and I know you by name."

Thirdly, Moses made a bold and unusual request: "Please, show me Your glory."

The LORD granted it, with reservations. He answered, "I shall make all My goodness pass in front of you, and I shall proclaim My name, 'the LORD' in your presence. I shall be gracious to anyone to whom I am gracious. I shall have compassion on anyone on whom I have compassion." However, He said, "You cannot see My face, because no human being may see Me and live." The LORD also said, "Look, here is a place near Me. Stand on the rock. When My glory goes past, I shall put you in a gap in the rock, and I shall cover you with My hand until I have gone past. Then I shall take My hand away, and you will see My back. Nevertheless, My face will not be seen."

Many mystics have wished to see the uncreated glory of God during this present life, such as Jesus' disciples saw when Jesus was transfigured. Unfortunately, many of them think of it as something that only a few special people can achieve by following a series of steps in holy living and contemplation of God. When God revealed His glory, He proclaimed His name. In other words, He spoke, and He revealed His character through words. God's grace and glory do not come through holy living and contemplative effort, still less by deliberately emptying one's mind of everything. When God allowed Moses to see His back and witness His goodness and His glory, He spoke. God has always been a God who speaks. That is how He created the world. He has revealed Himself through His prophets, and we have His revelation of Himself in the words of the Scriptures. Most important of all, He has spoken to us through His Son, whom John calls "The Word." The important thing for people is to hear. People can truly know God, but they can never know Him exhaustively in this life. We Christians have the promise that in the glory to come we shall see God, be like our Lord Jesus Christ, and see Him (Mt 5:8; 1 JN 3:2).

When God had given Moses the two new copies of the Ten Commandments, He also fulfilled His promise to Moses. As He did so, He revealed His name and character through words as a merciful God.

His words are all-important. It was a wonderful moment for Moses when the LORD came down in the cloud, stood with Moses there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed in front of him, and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unailing

mercy and truth. He preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. He certainly does not declare anyone exempt from punishment. He avenges the wrongdoing of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, upon the third and fourth generation."

Although the Lord affirmed His strict justice in calling sinners to account, He affirmed His mercy and compassion. The Bible has a series of synonyms for God's favour to sinners. The chief of these are mercy, grace, love, compassion, pity, favour, and kindness. The most characteristic one in the Old Testament is "mercy" and the most characteristic one in the New Testament is "grace." A further expression for this is "slow to anger." The Hebrew for this is, literally, "long in the nostrils." When a person is very angry, his nostrils flare, and his face becomes hot. It takes God a long time for His anger to become hot. Indeed, He would rather forgive than punish. This revelation of God's character is connected with His special name, which He used for Himself in His relationship to His people of the Old Testament, and which we know in translation as "the LORD." He binds Himself to His chosen people by a covenant of faithful love. Old Testament sacrifices for sin and Christ's unique sacrifice must be seen in this light.

The apostle John spoke about the incarnation of the Word and claimed that in Jesus Christ the apostles had witnessed His glory: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's only Son."

John also added two words that summed up the revelation of the LORD that Moses heard on Mount Sinai: "He is full of grace and truth." He went on to contrast Moses and Jesus Christ. Moses had not seen God fully. When the elders of Israel saw God, they were down on their faces, and saw the pavement under His feet (Ex 24:9-10). When Isaiah saw the LORD in the temple, He was sitting on a high and lofty throne (Isa 6:1). One important thing for the Israelites at Sinai was God's covenant of the Law. In the Old Testament believers were saved, not through the Law, but, like us, through God's unmerited mercy, which has been finally and fully revealed by Jesus Christ. John wrote: "For the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is God, who is in the lap of the Father, has made Him known."

Our knowledge of God does not come through retreating into our own minds in contemplative solitude, or wandering in the scrub as we seek His revelation of Himself in nature. True knowledge of God comes through our ears. We hear the words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is God's ultimate Word. Post-modernists are suspicious of all words, and take them to pieces with the expectation that they will find that they are lies that conceal selfish motives. These words of God, however, are sure. They are truth, and they are merciful. Our reaction to them can be summed up in three ways: first, listening, secondly, sorrow for sin as we hear God's Law and about His strict justice, and, thirdly, through faith in the words of the Gospel of God's mercy, in Jesus Christ, our Lord.