



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text
Exodus 33:1-23

Topic
God tells Moses no man can see His full glory and live,
but He says He can pass by Moses and show him His back

Title
"I'll See Back"

Who would be your pick for the greatest romance in history - real or fictional?

I did a Google search for the greatest romance in history. Most of the lists had the usuals: Romeo & Juliet; Antony & Cleopatra; Napoleon & Josephine; Lancelot & Guinevere; Paris & Helen of Troy.

I think some of the best recent romances come from Pixar. Carl & Ellie, from *Up*, ought to be on that list; along with Wall-E & Eva, and Mike Wazowski & Celia. (Honorarable mentions to Woody & Bo Peep, and Lightning McQueen & Sally).

What about Solomon & the Shulamite? Or Boaz & Ruth? Or Isaac & Rebekah?

None of the lists had these, or any other, biblical romances.

We rarely think of romance when we read the Bible - even though there are many amazing romances.

Jacob & Rachel. Jacob was sent by his father Isaac to find a wife from a relative's family. He met Rachel at the well and it was love at first sight. As recorded in Genesis 29:10-11, "When Jacob saw Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud."

Laban, agreed to their marriage if Jacob would work for him as a shepherd for seven years. Jacob agreed, and the seven years "seemed *only* a few days to him because of the love he had for her" (29:20).

At the end of the seven years, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah. To marry Rachel, Jacob would have to work an additional seven years - which he did gladly.

It's more than the fact there are great love stories like that *in* the Bible. The Bible IS a great love story. That's why "for God so **loved** the world..." is the most well-known of any verse in the Bible.

God is incredibly romantic:

- In the Old Testament God the Father speaks of the nation of Israel as His wife, and of Himself as her loving and faithful Husband (Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 3:14; Hosea 2:19).
- In the New Testament the Church is called the bride of Jesus Christ (Second Corinthians 11:2), and we are told that husbands ought to love their wives “as Christ loves the church.”

Commentators, largely male, are not so romantic. They overlook the romantic elements on the pages of the Bible. It’s up to each of us, therefore, to be looking for romance as we read God’s Word.

We need to put on our romance-glasses to see what is going on in Exodus thirty-two. If I can say this respectfully, God is jilted, then God acts hard-to-get, while Moses examples for us a passionate love for God that pursues His presence.

I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 Are You Passionate About Pursuing God?, and #2 Are You Proving The Presence Of God?

#1 Are You Passionate About Pursuing God? (v1-17)

The drama in this section is that God tells Moses He has decided to not accompany the Israelites to, or into, the Promised Land. He will instead send a mighty angel who will drive out their enemies.

The incident with the Golden Calf made the difference. The Israelites worshipped it instead of Him - which is often described in the Bible as spiritual adultery.

God wanted to accompany them. His desire was to dwell among them. He had previously said,

Exo 25:8 And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

Exo 29:45 I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God.

Exo 29:46 And they shall know that I *am* the LORD their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I *am* the LORD their God.

God desired to “dwell” with them. For their part, the Israelites had quickly turned away from God to worship a Golden Calf as their god.

I don't think it's going too far to say that God was jilted by Israel. He was literally 'left at the altar,' when the first sacrificed to Him, but then partied with the idol. So God said He'd withdraw from them.

Yet in verse fourteen of chapter thirty-three the Lord will relent, saying, ““My Presence will go *with you*, and I will give you rest.”

What happened in-between to cause Him to relent? Moses pursued Him, and wouldn't take His absence for an answer.

Exo 33:1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Depart *and* go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.'

Exo 33:2 And I will send *My* Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

If you're reading Exodus as a history book, this isn't really much of a big deal. God was going to withdraw, but He would send a powerful representative, and the result would be the same: Conquest of the Promised Land.

But you're not reading Exodus as a history book; not primarily. It is part of the story of the redemption of the human race. Some have accurately called the Bible the Romance of Redemption.

From a romantic standpoint, God's refusal to accompany them, and to dwell among them, was devastating. It was paramount to a legal separation.

Another way of approaching this is to see that God was offering the **gift**, but they'd no longer enjoy Him as the **Giver**. One commentator wrote:

This was a challenge to Moses and the nation as a whole. God told them they could have the Promised Land, but He would not remain with them in a close, personal way. If they were satisfied with that arrangement, it would prove they only loved God's blessings and not God Himself. If they challenged God - pleading with Him for His presence, not only His blessings - it would show a genuine heart for God Himself.

Exo 33:3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you *are* a stiff-necked people."

A "land flowing with milk and honey" is a way of announcing the fertility of the Promised Land.

I learned something interesting about "honey." According to a Jewish author, "Honey here (and elsewhere in the Scriptures) is generally understood to be a reference to fruit nectar, specifically date honey - not bees' honey."

If you consider what had recently transpired, maybe this was a good idea. Israel had quickly sinned, bringing upon themselves the sword and a plague. This new arrangement would insure that they were less likely to be consumed, but would arrive at their destination and claim their destiny.

It's only a good idea if you're settling for the things of the world; if you are a person dominated by your own fleshly appetites. If you love God - this was simply awful.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said,

To be given every other blessing is of no value if God is not with you. What is the value of Canaan? What is the value of milk and honey? What is the value of having possessions, if God was not with them? They saw that the realization of the presence of God, having this fellowship and company, was infinitely more important than everything else.

Exo 33:4 And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

Exo 33:5 For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You *are* a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.' "

Exo 33:6 So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb.

Even if He didn't accompany them, God might still "come up into [their] midst in one moment and consume" them. They were thus instructed to take off all ornamentation as a sign of genuine repentance.

Matthew Henry writes of this, saying, "God bade them *lay aside their ornaments*, and they did so, both to show, in general, their deep mourning, and, in particular, to take a holy revenge upon themselves for giving their ear-rings to make the Golden Calf. Those that would part with their ornaments for the maintenance of their sin could do no less than lay aside their ornaments in token of their sorrow and shame for it."

It all seemed so desperate, so final. God was leaving them. But Moses wouldn't let Him - not without pursuing Him.

Exo 33:7 Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting...

Moses had been on Mount Sinai receiving plans for the Tabernacle within which God would dwell among His people. It had not been built. **This is Moses' own tent.** He has no instruction or command to do this; it is his own spontaneous response to this devastating news.

Whenever I pass new construction, I'm curious as to what is being built. I love it when they put up a sign, telling you it's the future home of a new *Burger King* (or some such place).

Moses goes “outside the camp,” far from where Israel had sinned. Everyone - including God - must have been wondering what he was doing. Then the sign went up - “Tabernacle of Meeting.” Moses put up his own Tabernacle of Meeting, letting God and everyone else know he planned to wait there until God met with him.

He was pursuing God - spontaneously, romantically.

Exo 33:7 Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass *that* everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which *was* outside the camp.

Mind you - there had been no invitation to meet with God. But all those “who sought the Lord,” meaning those who desired His presence - the Giver, not just His gifts - pursued Him.

Exo 33:8 So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, *that* all the people rose, and each man stood *at* his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle.

We’re not privy to how many days Moses “went out to the Tabernacle,” only to return to the camp without having met with God. But each time he did, those who sought the Lord “stood” at their own tent doors in solidarity with him.

Exo 33:9 And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood *at* the door of the tabernacle, and *the LORD* talked with Moses.

One day it happened! God manifested Himself to Moses. He “talked with Moses.”

This would not have occurred if Moses had simply taken God at His Word that He was withdrawing. He seemed to intuit that there was more going on in the heart of God. He seemed to understand a jilted God wanted to be pursued.

Exo 33:10 All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing *at* the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man *in* his tent door.

They broke into spontaneous worship. We've calculated before that there were several million Israelites encamped. This must have been some praise time. I like to think that someone started a spiritual song, and that the rest joined in - all with the correct harmonies. Maybe they sang the Song of Moses, or the Song of Miriam, from earlier in the Exodus.

Whatever it was like - it was an incredible offering rising like incense to God.

Exo 33:11 So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

“Face to face” doesn’t mean God appeared in a body. We just saw that He manifested Himself as “the pillar of cloud.” Face to face means something like “in His presence.” It means God was genuinely present - but in a form that was non-fatal to humans.

Once again, Joshua gets suddenly dropped into the story. We saw last time that he was half-way up Mount Sinai, waiting for Moses to return. Now we see him taking up residence in this makeshift Tabernacle of Meeting.

We're not told why Joshua remained, so we shouldn't speculate. I will say that he is who I'd want to be in this story.

Do you ever do that - ask yourself who you'd want to be in the passage of the Bible you're reading? It's a good spiritual exercise.

Exo 33:12 Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.'

This is getting interesting. Notwithstanding Israel's sin, Moses reminds God of their personal intimacy. God had said some amazing things to Moses - that He "knew [him] by name," and that Moses had "found grace in [God's] sight."

Moses acted slighted! Without consulting him, God had decided to send an angel instead of going Himself, and Moses didn't know if it was Michael or Gabriel, or some other such dignitary. The man God knew by name, and who found grace in His sight, had been kept in the dark about a major decision.

Exo 33:13 Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation *is* Your people."

Moses makes a plea. Since he had found grace in God's sight, he demanded God personally show him the "way," *not* some subordinate.

Moses' motives were not material; he didn't simply want to get safely to the Promised Land and receive his and Israel's inheritance. He wanted to "find grace in [God's] sight."

Wait - hadn't he already "found grace?" He had - but he understood this to be a growing in grace. It's an Old Testament way of expressing that God begins a good work in your heart and then brings it to completion.

Moses wanted God - *not* His gifts.

Then he adds, "consider that this nation *is* Your people." In other words, it was God Who had separated them from the Gentiles, and Who had led them out from slavery. Should He not complete what He had begun in them as well?

Exo 33:14 And He said, "My Presence will go *with you*, and I will give you rest."

God never changes His mind, but He can, and does, relent in order to act according to His nature.

I'm strongly suggesting that it was Moses' pursuit of God that led to God relenting. If Moses had done nothing to pursue God, the history of Israel would have been very different.

Exo 33:15 Then he said to Him, "If Your Presence does not go *with us*, do not bring us up from here.

Exo 33:16 For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who *are* upon the face of the earth."

Moses understood that *everything* is about God restoring the relationship with mankind that was lost in the Garden of Eden. It wasn't about **land**, not directly. It was about **love**. "God so loved the world" of lost humans that right in the Garden He promised to send His Son to resolve the issue of sin in order that God and mankind might once again dwell together.

That's where the bigger story ends, does it not? In eternity, with us face-to-face with God - in perfect eternal bodies that cannot sin?

Exo 33:17 So the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name."

"I'll go with you, go with them," says the Lord. He would continue to dwell among them. They would continue to fall short, to fail, to snatch defeat from the hands of victory. But, for now, those who "sought the Lord," those who pursued Him, could enjoy a spiritual rest in Him.

There is a passage of Scripture, addressed to us, in which Jesus indicates that for **our** lapses of love for Him, **He may withdraw from us**. It is His letter to the church in Ephesus, in the Book of the Revelation. He tells us it is possible for us to leave our first love for Him. It's so serious that Jesus says if we continue in that state, He will remove our "lampstand" from its place.

He wasn't saying anything about individual salvation, because He was addressing the church corporately. The churches on the earth are lampstands; they are the only spiritual light in the darkness of a realm whose ruler is "the god of this world," Satan.

He was warning that the church at Ephesus would cease to have a testimony about the Lord.

A couple of strung-together quotes by A.W. Tozer might better bring out what I'm saying:

We have been snared in the coils of spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him, we need no more seek Him... To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love.

The apostle Paul pursued God:

Php 3:12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

Php 3:13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,

Php 3:14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

What's the take-away? It's to realize that a big part of your relationship with God is a romance, and to therefore ask yourself, "Am I passionate about pursuing God?"

You might start by listing what it is you are passionate about, and see where Jesus is on that list.

#2 Are You Proving The Presence Of God?

(v18-23)

In *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 2*, Rocket gives Yandu a space suit and a jet pack - one of each. Yandu uses the suit to

save Quill as they launch into the fatal environment of space. With no suit, Yandu dies of exposure.

Certain environments require specialized clothing. Heaven is one such place; it requires a glorified human body.

The presence of God is such a place, also; that is, the immediate, full presence of God in all His glory. Without some protection, a person would be consumed.

God had appeared to Moses in a bush that was burning. He appeared as a pillar of fire by day, and of cloud by night. These manifestations left Moses wanting more.

Exo 33:18 And he said, "Please, show me Your glory."

Moses knew that man was created in the image of God. He knew that Adam and Eve met with God in the Garden of Eden. He wanted to see God the way they did - not just as a bush or a pillar.

Exo 33:19 Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

God was going to manifest Himself in a physical way, for sure. But the greater revelation was in the things He would proclaim.

Seeing God's glory involved God making a proclamation of His "name," meaning His character. The particular proclamation was about Him being gracious and compassionate.

This is insightful for at least two reasons:

1. First, **His proclamations themselves reveal His glory.** We could put it this way: God's Word, the Bible, reveals His glory. We don't need the Lord to manifest Himself in some appearance. We don't need miracles - although we believe He can, and does, still perform them. We only need to proclaim His Word - through lives lived for Him, and by sharing the Word itself, in all its counsel.
2. Second, **He desires to show His glory - to show Himself - to all Adam's descendants.** When God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," there is no hint of Him limiting those traits to a few chosen people. Quite the opposite. He is able to look upon the world of men and, even though **all** are born in trespasses and sin, spiritually dead, condemned, He has chosen to offer salvation by grace - as a free gift to "whosoever" - seeing He is actively compassionate.

Exo 33:20 But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."

There are many times in the Old Testament that God appears in human form. We call these either *Theophanies*, or *Christophanies*. They are pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus - **not** of God the Father.

In our current state, we cannot be in the full presence of God. His holiness would incinerate us in our current human bodies. We need, and will receive, resurrection bodies which will be fit for eternity.

If Moses was to "see" God, he would need protection.

Exo 33:21 And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock.

Exo 33:22 So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by.

Exo 33:23 Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."

What did Moses see? It's complicated. Just when you think he saw some-sort of human-like figure, a scholar points out that the word for "back" is *never* used for anatomy.

Some scholars solve this by saying it was a Theophany - that it was Jesus before He was the God-man. If that's true, how did Jesus "cover [Moses] with [His] hand" as He walked by?

In the end, we can't know for sure exactly how God manifested Himself.

The word for "back" can be translated *after*, or *afterwards*. If we assume this appearance included brightness, then we could translate the word as *after-effects* or *afterglow*.

I want to reduce this to a devotional insight. I asked the question, "Are you proving the presence of God?" One of the definitions of the word "prove" is *to give demonstration of by action*.

God sets Moses on a rock that is near to Him, tells him to stand there, and proclaims His glory, leaving Moses in an afterglow.

Your "rock" is Jesus Christ. You're told to take your "stand" upon Him, e.g., in Ephesians 6:13 & 14.

Whatever your circumstances - whether they be blessings or buffetings - you have the proclamation of His glory in His Word to keep you.

You can 'prove' the presence of God to those looking on by trusting in His proclamations, thereby revealing Him.

As marvelous as this experience was for Moses, it still cannot compare to the revelation of God given to **us** in Jesus Christ:

Joh 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Joh 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Pursue God... Prove His Presence. We are part of the greatest romance in history - and it's fact, not fiction.