

The God Who Is Near (Part 2 of 7)

The Face of Moses

Exodus 34:29-35

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"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him." (Exodus 34:29–35, ESV)

On a wall near our main floor bathroom in my childhood home were two plastic school buses with slots for pictures. There were twelve spots, one for each grade, and every year my mom would put the new school picture in the slots for my sister and me. When I was in elementary school, I thought it was fun. When I got into junior high, not so much. It was hard to get beyond the bowl hair-cuts, the buckteeth phase, and the eternal braces' season. Invariably, if my friends came over, they would ask where the bathroom was, and I would cringe, knowing that they would walk by my "wall of shame."

But sometime in high school, and certainly in college, my view of those pictures changed. They were still not very flattering, especially the "body wave" year, but the pictures became a visual record of growth and change. The pictures were part of a bigger story, and I would sometimes find myself stopping and looking at the pictures, thinking about my childhood and how it had formed me.

The school bus photos were a visual record of my personal progression. They told a story. They were a record of my history.

One of the reasons why Exodus is a thrilling book to study is because of its foundational role for the entire Bible. In many respects, the book of Exodus is a lot like those elementary pictures. There are some not-so-cute moments, but if you look closely you can see glimpses of what is coming.

There are concepts, themes, and images that are introduced in this book that help us to understand the overall message of the Bible, the life of Jesus Christ, and the gospel. For example,

Exodus introduces us to the burning bush, the name of God, the Passover Lamb, the Ten Commandments, deliverance from slavery, and the concept of redemption. Part of the joy of studying this book is being able to make the connections between the Old and the New Testaments, to trace the plan and message of God throughout biblical history.

I would suspect that there are a number of you who had no idea how important the book of Exodus is for the overall flow of thought in the Bible. Over the last year a number of people have commented to me on how helpful and worshipful the book of Exodus has been for their understanding of what God is doing. When you see the gospel in its elementary and foundational form, it makes you love the end product even more.

Our text today, Exodus 34:29-35, is about the glory of God and the effect on Moses. And the great thing about this text is the fact that the apostle Paul uses it in Second Corinthians to make a very important point about the glory of God in us through the gospel. So this is one of those instances where you can see all the pictures – kindergarten through 12th grade – all at once. It is meaningful, marvelous, and worshipful.

We are going to trace the glory of God from Moses to the gospel to you. We are going to see how the glory of God shone through Moses and through the work of Jesus Christ, and how it is to shine through everyone who is a follower of Jesus. It is a glorious picture!

The Glory of God in Moses

Last week we learned that God is a God of second chances. After the colossal failure of the people with the golden calf, Moses returned to Mount Sinai, and God renewed His covenant with His people. Moses met with God for forty days and forty nights, and then he returned to the people of Israel who were waiting at the base of the mountain.

Verse 29 tells us that Moses *“came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand . . .”* The first tablets were broken by Moses at the sight of the idolatry and immorality, and now there are two new tablets, symbolizing a second chance.

But there was something different about Moses, and he was unaware of it, when he came down the mountain a second time. His face was illuminated – *“Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.”* This was a new development, and it is very significant.

Moses’ face was glowing, and his skin reflected the afterglow of God’s glory. He had been exposed to the beautiful presence of God, and his face showed it. There was something emanating from Moses’ countenance. The Hebrew literally says, “the skin of his face sent out horns,” and early translations of the Bible in Latin interpreted the phrase to mean that Moses literally had horns. That explains why Michelangelo and many medieval and Renaissance artists depicted Moses as the prophet with horns.¹ (All the more reason to study the Bible carefully!)

¹ Philip Ryken, *Exodus – Saved for God’s Glory*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2005)

The meaning is simply that there was something different about Moses' face. His face was reflecting the glory of God. It was clear that he had been with God. Moses bore the imprint of God's glory.

Moses' countenance affected the people of Israel. According to verse 30, they were afraid to come near him. The glory of God emanating from his face caused the people to be afraid. This is a frequent theme in the Bible when it comes to the display of God's holiness. God's presence understandably creates fear in sinful people. There is something about the power, the other-worldliness, the purity, and the mystery of God's glory that creates caution. The prophet Isaiah experienced this when he encountered the presence of God in the temple and heard *"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory"* (Isaiah 6:3). Isaiah's reaction was to say:

"And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'" (Isaiah 6:5, ESV)

The people are not out of line with their response. In fact, their reaction is part of God's design in this moment. Moses is going to deliver God's word to the people, and the glory of God on his face serves to validate the message.

"But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai." (Exodus 34:31–32, ESV)

But then something interesting happens. Verse 33 tells us that Moses put a veil on his face after he finished speaking to them. What's more, verses 34–35 tell us that this practice continued beyond Mt. Sinai. In the future there were other moments where Moses would meet with God, and when he emerged from those meetings, his face would be revealed. Then Moses would put the veil back on his face. So what is the deal with the veil?

First, the veil was not to protect Moses; it was to comfort the people. It seems that the display of God's glory on Moses' face was a bit frightening to the people. Doug Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus, says the following about the reason for the veil:

Therefore the veil he donned . . . was undoubtedly for the people's sake – not because his unveiled face would physically harm them but because it apparently scared so much psychologically that they found it hard to be near him. The people presumably were distracted and unnerved by whatever came from Moses' face.²

Second, it is important to not become overly focused on the veil, because it is not the main point of the passage. The veil is hiding or covering the real point of Exodus 34:29–25 – the glory of God. The point of the passage is to 1) confirm Moses' leadership, 2) affirm Yahweh's presence, 3)

² Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006).

demonstrate Yahweh's supremacy, and 4) motivate the people for obedience. Moses could have simply delivered God's word to the people without any physical illumination, but the divine glow of his face gave the message new meaning and depth.

In other words, the glory of God in the face of Moses proved that this was real! The words coming from Moses' mouth were not just his words; they were God's words. The commands were God's commands. And the glory of God in the face of Moses gave the people evidence that they were hearing something from God!

The glory of God in Moses' face connected their lives to the very life of God.

The Glory of God in the Gospel

As I said earlier, this story and its lessons are used by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament when talking about the Gospel. There is a remarkable and insightful connection in 2 Corinthians 3:7-17, and it connects the glory of God to the gospel.

By way of background in 2 Corinthians, Paul was defending his authority to speak into the lives of the church at Corinth. Paul's relationship with this church was complicated, and they took a dim view of his ministry in light of his suffering. His detractors accused him of suffering too much, since they believed that a Spirit-filled apostle of the resurrected Christ would be more victorious. So the first three chapters are a defense of the legitimacy of his ministry.

Chapter three is the pinnacle in his argument, and he posits that the legitimacy of his ministry comes from the glory of the gospel mediated by the Spirit. Like Moses, Paul's authority was being challenged, and he points to the greater glory of the gospel – a glory greater than the glory shown in Moses' face.

This is clearly stated in 2 Corinthians 3:7-9.

"Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory." (2 Corinthians 3:7-9, ESV)

Paul uses the glory expressed in Exodus 34 as the basis for talking about the glory of the New Covenant and the "ministry of the Spirit." He identifies that there was "glory" in the ministry of condemnation, which refers to the display of God's character in the giving of the Law. The Ten Commandments and all derivative laws of the Old Testament reflected the character of God. So there was "glory" in the book of Exodus.

But there is even greater glory in the New Covenant, the New Testament, and the work of Jesus. How so? Paul calls it "the ministry of righteousness," and he highlights the fact that the Law could never produce true righteousness. The rules, regulations, and restrictions were designed to send a strong message ("glory") about God's righteousness and His holiness. That message came through

loud and clear because no one could keep the Law. It revealed the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of His people. That is why the glory of God in Moses was so frightening. It was a constant reminder that God was not like them.

Jesus Christ changed all of that. He ushered in a new and better day. He inaugurated the coming of the glory of God in the gospel. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross so that the righteous requirements of the Law could be fulfilled in Him (Rom 8:3-4). He became the sacrifice to satisfy the just demands of God's holiness so that God could forgive undeserving sinners (Rom. 3:26). And for those who receive Christ's death, they are born again, given a new heart, declared righteous, filled with the Spirit, given a new heart, and set on a new path of freedom. Romans 8:1-4 connects this for us:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:1-4, ESV)

This is the gospel! This the New Covenant. This is the new era of redemption that Exodus was pointing toward – a time when the law of God will not just come from a mountain and from a man named Moses; the law of God is written on the hearts of God's people by the Spirit. In other words, obedience is not something that you must do, but it is what you want to do.

And this transformation from the inside out, because of the work of Jesus, is more glorious than the Old Covenant which Moses brought. Notice that the gospel has a glory that surpasses the old (v 10), is permanent (v 11), creates assurance (v 12), is inaugurated by Jesus (v 14), involves the Spirit (v 17), and brings freedom (v 17)!

"Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:10-17, ESV)

So the Old Covenant, the Law, and Moses' message had glory connected to it. The Law was good and right and glorious. It revealed what God is like and what people are like. The Law displayed the glory of God. But it was not the whole story.

In fact, Paul presses the veil metaphor further to refer not to something that hides God's glory from sinful people, but to say that people have a spiritual veil between themselves and God. Verse 15

says it clearly: *"When Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts."* But verse 16 gives the solution: *"When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed."* What does that mean?

It means that when a person turns to Christ and looks to Him for his forgiveness, he is born again and "sees the kingdom" (John 3:3). It means that when a person turns to Christ, he has spiritual eyesight to see the glory of God. Paul reiterates this so well in 2 Corinthians 4.

"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6, ESV)

Now Paul is not referring to seeing something physically. But he is referring to a supernatural moment where everything changes. When a person is regenerated or born again, a miracle happens in his soul and in the very essence of his being. We come to behold the glory of God in the good news that Jesus Christ died for my sins.

We behold the beauty of God's glory in the gospel when we are rescued from our slavery to sin, our inability to keep God's law, and our total impotence to do anything about it on our own. We behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus when we are converted and come to Christ. We behold the glory of God when we are born again.

And Paul says that this glory in the gospel was what the glory of Moses in Exodus 34 was all about. There is a greater glory in the gospel. A glory that brings freedom where there used to be fear!

But Paul is not finished.

The Glory of God in You

2 Corinthians 3:18 is one of my most favorite verses in the entire Bible. I love its vision, its hope, and its practicality. Paul takes the idea of glory from Exodus 34 and magnifies it through the gospel, and then he makes it personal and practical.

Verse 18 sings with the beauty of God:

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV)

What does this text say about God's glory in your life?

1. It is for everyone

Paul celebrates the glory of God in every follower of Jesus. He puts us in the position of Moses in Exodus 34! Paul asserts that every Christian ("we all"), not just an elite group, is able to approach and experience the glory of the Lord. Because of the new birth, every believer in Jesus is able to behold the glory of God in the gospel. No longer is it limited to a special class of people – like priests or leaders – but every one of you can behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2. Beholding is contemplating Jesus

Now what does it mean to behold the glory of the Lord? The NASB says “beholding as in a mirror” and the NIV says “contemplate the Lord’s glory.” The reason that the translators render *behold* this way is because they are trying to get at the point that no one actually beholds God in this lifetime. But we see His image in the person of Christ. And the NASB indicates that the image is not the full display of God’s glory. It is not the face-to-face image that we will see, the glory that Moses longed to see. It is the image like the reflection in a mirror.

3. Transformation is the effect

But the point of this is to get to what comes next in the text, namely that as Moses was changed by the glory of the Lord, believers in Jesus are able to be transformed as well. As we behold the glory of God through the person and work of Jesus, we are transformed. The Greek word that is used here is the same word from which we get our word *metamorphosis*. It means a radical change of form or nature. In beholding, we are becoming. Contemplation of Him leads to change in us!

“In beholding the true glory of the Lord reflect in Christ, our minds become transformed so that we are not conformed to this world and its perceptions and values but conformed to Christ and the paradoxical pattern of his suffering and resurrection.”³

4. It is incremental

The glory that Paul has in mind for our lives is not just an ethereal, theoretical glory. The Bible’s vision of this glory is practical, daily, and incremental. The text says “from one degree of glory to another.” The transformation is not instantaneous. The full and final transformation is what we yet long for. It is why we long for Jesus to return. It is why we long for the final step in salvation called glorification.

But this is also very hopeful because there are times when you might look at your life and you see change and growth, but you also see the depth and breadth of what still needs to change. But this is how God works. There are no finished followers. God is still working on each and every one of us. So don’t ever give up. Don’t ever quit!

5. The goal is to look like Jesus

The glorious transformation makes us look more and more like Jesus. We are being transformed into “the same image.” God is making us to look like his Son! This is the goal and drive for everything that we who follow Jesus do. Notice how Paul connects all of this in Colossians 1:27-28.

“To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and

³ David Garland, *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 202

teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Colossians 1:27–28, ESV)

6. God does this by His Spirit

I love where this ends! It concludes with a reminder that God is the one who is doing this work and that He is doing it by His Spirit. In other words, there is something greater at work in you than you. God regenerates you, He changes you, He empowers you, He fills you, and He keeps you all the way to the end. Are you involved and active? Absolutely! You can quench the Spirit, grieve the Spirit, and hinder what God wants to do in your life.

But in the end, what happens to you is a miracle. In seeing the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ, you are really, truly changed.

So I would implore you today to not wait another day to give your heart and life to Jesus. God may be calling you today to turn from your sins and to put your faith in Jesus Christ. I’m inviting you to be born again – to be changed so deeply, so profoundly, and so practically that it is nothing but a miracle.

And to those of you who have been born again: Keep beholding! Keep transforming! Keep changing! Keep trusting! Keep walking in the Spirit!

Let me, like Paul, “encourage you and charge you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory!” (2 Thess. 2:12)

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