

DHW

LESSON 26

THE BOOK OF EXODUS

CHAPTERS 33 & 34

INTRODUCTION

The children of Israel had sinned a great sin against God. Moses had interceded on behalf of the people. It moved God with compassion and changed His intention to destroy the people. God cancelled the punitive action because of the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, God would plague the people because they had made the molten calf (32:35).

The present two chapters reveal more of the nature and character of God in His dealings with the children of Israel. If we sin and repent of our sins, God is merciful and gracious to forgive us and our relationship with Him will

be restored. However, although our sins are forgiven, we must bear the consequences of our sinful actions. We will learn that God removed His presence from being in the midst of the people. That was the result of their sin. However, God reiterated His covenant promise which He had made with them. God repeated some of His instructions to them so that they would remember and obey Him, and not incur His wrath upon them. We also learn that God honoured His servant Moses in the eyes of the people so that they would listen to him. Moses therefore served as a mediator between God and them.

The following is the outline of chapters 33 & 34:

- 1) The LORD would not have His Tabernacle pitched in the midst of the children of Israel (33:1-11);
- 2) Moses pleaded for God's continued presence with the Israelites (33:12-23);

- 3) The LORD made another tablets of stone to inscribe the Ten Commandments (34:1-9);
- 4) The LORD made a covenant with the Israelites giving them specific instructions when they entered the Promised Land (34:10-27);
- 5) Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of testimony (34:28-35).

STUDY HIS WORD

Divine Presence Withdrawn

The LORD instructed Moses to lead the people whom He had brought out of Egypt into the land, which God had sworn that He would give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God was true to His covenant promises which He would never break. The faithfulness of God is unquestionable and His promises irrevocable.

The LORD also told Moses that He would send *an angel* before him. This change of *an angel* is significant because it was an ordinary angel unlike the Angel whom the LORD mentioned earlier that the Angel bore His name (Exodus 23:20, 21). God kept His promise that when the children entered the Promised Land, He would drive the Canaanites out of the land, which flowed with *milk and honey* (33:3). However, the LORD mentioned that He would not go up in the midst of them because they were *a stiffnecked people* (33:3). The withdrawal of God's presence in their midst was a preventive measure from being utterly destroyed should they sin against Him again. Their sin would incur the anger of God and He would destroy them. Their sin had separated them from God.

When the people heard of this judgment of God, they mourned and they stripped themselves off the jewelled ornaments which they were

wearing. This act of putting on jewelled ornaments was an affront to the LORD in that they loved and thought of these things more than they loved and thought of God. They were a proud and stubborn people. In order to regain the fellowship with God, they stripped themselves of these ornaments right there at the foot of Mount Horeb (another name of Mount Sinai). This was a sign of their true repentance, willing to part away with something that they treasured most. Accordingly, Moses removed the tabernacle and had it pitched *far off from the camp* of the children of Israel. This was not the Tabernacle which God had given them the blueprint to build. But it was a temporary tabernacle which Moses called *the tabernacle of the congregation* (33:7).

When Moses walked out of the camp to enter this tabernacle, all the people rose up to watch by standing at the entrance of their tents. They looked at Moses until he had entered the tabernacle. *As Moses entered the tabernacle, the*

cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses (33:9). This was God's testimony of His approval of Moses as His chosen servant. The people saw the whole event and all of them bowed down to worship with every man at the entrance of his tent. Now everyone who would seek the LORD would have to go out of the camp to this tabernacle. The divine commentator remarks that the LORD spoke to Moses *face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend* (33:11a). The phrase face to face is a figure of speech. It did not literally mean that Moses saw the face of God for no man could see the face of God and live (33:20). Moses then returned to the camp of the children of Israel. Joshua, who was earlier with Moses, remained in the tabernacle. Once again, God showed them that He had not entirely forsaken them. They could still go to the tabernacle outside the camp to seek the LORD for counsel and direction.

Moses Pleads for God's Presence with the Israelites

This section gives an account of Moses' dialogue with the LORD. Observe the openness and frankness with which Moses spoke to the LORD. Now Moses told God that He had said to him to lead the Israelites and had not informed him who would be with him. Yet the LORD had expressed to him that He knew Moses by name and that he had also found grace in His sight (33:12). Moses reasoned that if God called him by name—treated as if that was so, he asked the LORD to show him His way that He might know Him and that He might consider the nation of Israel as *thy people*. Moses was asking to know about God's character and the way He was dealing with the Israelites whom He should regard as His people (33:13).

The LORD assured Moses that His presence would be with him. This was evident by the pillar of cloud which stood at the door of the tabernacle when Moses entered

it (33:9-10). The LORD also mentioned that He would give Moses rest. Moses was indeed under great stress and strain in leading a stiff-necked people. The LORD promised that He would lighten his burden. Moses added that if the LORD would not go with him, then He should *carry us not up* to the land (33:15). His grace should go with them so that the children of Israel could be seen as separated unto the LORD from all the other people of the land (33:16). The LORD replied to Moses that He would do all that he had spoken.

As Moses entered into the tabernacle, the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance of the tabernacle indicating God's presence with him. God showed His special approval of Moses before the people. The children of Israel saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tabernacle. They spontaneously stood up and worshipped God at the door of their own tent.

Moses' special status was further vindicated by the fact that the LORD spoke to him *face to face* or *mouth to mouth* (Numbers 12:8). This does not mean that God has a face and a mouth. These are figurative expressions. They mean that Moses had a unique position as a spokesman of the LORD who spoke to him personally, directly, and freely. The LORD conversed with Moses not through an intermediary, dream or vision.

Moses asked to see the glory of God (33:18). The glory of God is His total goodness.¹ The LORD would let His glory pass before Moses, and the name of YAHWEH would be proclaimed. However, Moses might not see the face of God for no man could see God and live. All this experience accorded to Moses was by the sovereign will of God who would have mercy on whom He would have mercy. God then told him

¹ Matthew 19:17 *And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*

that Moses could go to the cleft of a rock where God would show him. There when the glory of God passed him, He would cover him, meaning to protect him with His hand. And when God would take off His hand, Moses could only have a glimpse of His back parts.

This was a very rare and special privilege that the LORD allowed Moses. The mention of *my hand*, *my back*, and *my face*, are anthropomorphic expressions. It means spiritual truths are expressed in human form for man to understand. Moses could only get a glimpse of God. God's ultimate or complete Being is a mystery.

The Ten Commandments Re-inscribed

Moses had shattered the original tablets containing the Ten Commandments. God told Moses to cut out another two similar tablets of stone and bring them up to the mountain in the morning. God would write the words which He had written on the first tablets of stone. Moses was to go up

alone. The people were strictly forbidden to come near to the mountain, not even the beasts lest they would be destroyed (34:3). Moses did accordingly and went up to the top of the mountain.

The LORD came down to the top of the mountain in the pillar of cloud. God granted Moses' two earlier requests: that he might know the ways of the LORD, and that he might behold His presence (33:13). The LORD God passed before Moses. God revealed that He was merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth. He would ever forgive sins but that does not mean that sinner would not be punished (34:5-7). Moses immediately responded with great humility and bowed his head to the ground and worshipped the LORD.

The LORD Makes His Covenant with the Israelites

Moses interceded on behalf of the children of Israel. He reasoned that if he had found grace in the sight of the LORD, he prayed that the LORD would go

among them. He acknowledged that they were stiff-necked people. He called on the LORD to forgive their sin and to take them for His inheritance (34:9).

The LORD answered that He would make a covenant. And before all the people, He would perform *marvellous* and *terrible* works which had never been done before all the other nations. He would drive the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite out of the Land. The LORD warned them that they should take heed not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land wherever they went. Otherwise they would be a snare to them. Instead they should destroy their altars, break and cut down their idols. They should not worship any other god because the LORD whose name was Jealous, was a Jealous God (34:14). They should take heed that they do not commit spiritual adultery with the inhabitants of the land lest they might make sacrifices to their gods

and cause their sons to go a whoring (spiritually speaking) after them by marrying their daughters who would lead their sons astray. The LORD stressed that they should make no molten gods (34:17).

On the positive side, they should keep the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. For seven days they should eat only unleavened bread in the month of Abib, the month that they came out of Egypt. Every firstborn male of cattle, ox, and sheep belonged to the LORD. The firstling of an ass had to be redeemed with a lamb. If they did not redeem it with a lamb, they should break the neck of the firstling of the ass.

The LORD stipulated that none of the Israelites should appear before God empty-handed. They must observe the Sabbath when they should rest even in *earing time and harvest*. They should also observe the Feast of Weeks of the firstfruits of wheat harvesting, and the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of each year.

Three times in a year all male Israelites must present themselves before the LORD their God. The LORD promised that He would cast out the other nations before them and enlarge the borders of their land. The LORD would ensure that no other man would take their land which God had given them. They must never offer blood of the sacrifice unto the LORD with leaven. Regarding the Feast of the Passover, nothing should be left until the next morning. They either consumed all of the Passover or burned the leftovers. For the firstfruits of the land they must bring them to the house of the LORD their God. They must not kill a kid which was still in its mother's milk. The LORD commanded Moses to write down all these words which the LORD had said to him. They were the terms of the covenant which the LORD made with them (34:27).

Moses Descends from Mount Sinai

Moses had been with God for quite a while, forty days and nights. He came down with the second tablets of stone of the Ten Commandments which were written by the finger of God. A strange thing happened to Moses. The effect of God's glory upon Moses shone through him. When Moses went down back to the camp of the Israelites, his face shone or glowed to the extent that even Aaron and all the children of Israel were afraid to come near him (34:30). Moses had to call them to come near to him. Moses told them all that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. Moses had to put a veil covering his face but when he stood before the LORD to speak, he took off the veil. The spiritual thrust of this incident is clear. Any Christian who walks close to God all the time will eventually shine with the love and character of God; the fruit of the Spirit; and with the likeness

of Christ. People all around are able to see.

PRACTICAL VALUE

God revealed that He is ever gracious and merciful. But that does not mean that His children can habitually sin. Christians do not habitually sin, but when we sin we need to repent and seek God's forgiveness through Christ Jesus. Although God forgives our sin, when we repent and seek His forgiveness, we will still suffer from the consequences of our sin. We learn too that it is a serious matter to break God's clear commandment. If not for the Lord Jesus Christ, our Intercessor, we would have already been consumed by God. Take heed lest we sin against God.

Much is mentioned here about Moses. We simply cannot overlook the fact that Moses cared more for his people than for himself. In his encounters with God he always prayed and pleaded for the children of Israel. Every Christian should emulate Moses by

caring for his fellow Christians and praying for them.

A third lesson we can learn is that God often repeated and emphasized His instructions to the Israelites. They fall into three areas of our life. We must be very careful that we do not fall into spiritual apostasy or idolatry. Anything or anyone that we love or consider more than God is idolatry and it incurs the wrath of God. Beware of idols. When appearing before God each LORD'S Day and special days of worship we are obligated not to present ourselves before the LORD empty-handed. We should always be willing to give to the LORD our God for we belong to Him. So, be generous in giving to the LORD for the maintenance of His church and the advancement of His kingdom. Finally, the LORD is faithful and worthy of our trust. If there is need to make some sacrifices in order to obey His commandments or meet our spiritual obligations unto God, we can and must obey and trust Him.

When we humble ourselves and honour Him as Moses did, God will honour us. AMEN