

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Exodus 34:15-35:3 A Radiant Relationship

Transcendent Relationships

Have you ever been so enthralled by someone or something that you have lost all track of time? Perhaps you are forever late for dinner because you get wrapped in your hobby and don't want to break off to eat. Perhaps in those early days of courting your future husband or wife, there were times when you were so caught up by each other that the days were just too short, and you wished they would never end. Time flows by so quickly when you are enjoying yourself, and what greater enjoyment is there than to get to know your life-partner more fully?

Loosing track of time often means loosing out on sleep, and maybe even meals too; yet despite this, people will comment on how well young lovers look – for their inner happiness at spending time with the one they are falling in love with lights up their lives. Indeed, we use that expression quite a lot – “her face lit up as soon as he entered the room”, or if we want to be excessive, “she lit the whole room up by her presence”. While this might not be a recipe for saving on electricity bills, nevertheless it is a fact that such emotions have a real and measurable affect on our physical well-being.

Such intense emotions have an effect on the way we behave – both consciously, as we bend our routines to fit in with the significant other in our lives, and subconsciously as our priorities and attitudes begin to change. No longer does the young man think solely about himself; a new, bigger, motor bike is somehow less important and instead a more date-friendly car is bought; and that is only the thin end of the wedge!

Such experiences are not unusual – people are falling in love with other people every day, and many will still be in love tomorrow too! It is, after all, quite natural.

Moses relationship with God

What is truly astonishing is the love story that we read of in this book. It is a love story like no other, one which eclipses the best of human fact or fiction. It is the love story of God, and man. Far from being dead, far from being far away, far from being disinterested or unmoved by our plight, we find that God is in love with his creation.

Now sometimes that story is revealed through God's treatment of whole peoples, such as when he rescues his people lock, stock and barrel from Egypt. At other times, it is revealed through his relationship with an individual, like Abraham or David. But nowhere is it revealed in quite the same way as it is through Moses in Exodus 34.

Sandwiched in between repetitions of various rules and regulations, it is easy to skip over this chapter without appreciating what is really going on. For it is difficult to grasp the significance of what we have read. Moses, a man, a mere mortal sinful man, is enjoying a close, even intimate, relationship with the Creator God who made the entire universe. He is in love with God, and God is in love with him. They spend nearly 6 weeks alone together on the mountain, but Moses felt neither hunger or thirst – he was too captivated by his lover, God. Far from fading away through lack of food, Moses was a picture of health – literally and frighteningly radiant!

Closer second time around

This was not the first time Moses had spent such a long time in God's presence – it would only have been a week or two since he returned from his first “mountain top” experience. During those weeks, he had received the Ten Commandments, the Law, and detailed instructions on how to build and operate the tabernacle.

Yet there is no mention of Moses' face shining after his first forty days! Maybe the detail is overlooked, as attention switches immediately to the Golden Calf and how Moses deals with that. But maybe too things were different during this second period of seclusion on the mountain.

Having already had the first experience, perhaps he got “deeper” into God purely by virtue of the cumulative time he spent in God's presence. Yet there is another difference this time, brought about not by quantity of time, but by the very experience of dealing with the Israelite's shameful idolatry. For now Moses understood God – and his people – much better. Understanding his people's great potential for sin and tendency to wander away from God, Moses would be all the more conscious of his tremendous privilege to be in the presence of God at all.

Further, Moses had felt something of the pain and anger that God feels at sin, in the very real pain and anger he felt when he discovered the Israelites – and even his own brother Aaron – had rebelled so quickly and so callously. Yet he also shared the love that God has for his people, demonstrated by the way Moses pleaded their case before God. He understood more now about both God's anger with sin and his love-driven desire to forgive than he had known before.

This had been revealed the hard way. It was not something that Moses could really appreciate just by being told, even by God. He had to experience it himself to begin to appreciate the depths of God's feelings for us. Though we may wish it were not so, we are so dull of understanding when it comes to things of God that we do need the hard way to learn from. Perhaps that thought will encourage you when times are hard and things seem set against you.

So now, Moses starting point was a fuller understanding of God. He had already received the revelations he needed to teach the people, to set up the tabernacle, to institute the ceremonies and formalities which would shape the culture of God's people for the next 1000 years. What more was there to say or to learn during this second period on the mountain?

Perhaps he needed a refresher course, in case the trauma of their idolatry had put things out of his mind. Or maybe having studied for GCSE Divinity, it was time to move on to A level.

I wonder if he learned a lot more that he was never able – or even allowed - to pass on to others, about the wonders of God's plan of redemption, about the meaning behind the sacrifices, the tabernacle, and everything that was going on with his people. We know from Hebrews that the earthly tabernacle was but a shadow of the reality in heaven; and the sacrificial system but a picture of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ which was still to come. I wonder if God revealed this plan in detail to Moses, now that Moses understood more fully the need for salvation and thus for a saviour.

Whatever the agenda was, I expect there were long periods where Moses simply stood, or lay, in awe of God; transfixed by his glory and splendour, amazed that there could be something more glorious than the after-glow following his passing, which if you remember was the closest he could see of God's glory (back in Chapter 33).

Glory and Worship

Now it is considered a demeaning thing for one man to bow down before another – our love of democracy has eroded the earthly types of reverence for authority. So for many, the idea of bowing down before a god is appalling, degrading, even sub-human. Indeed, the bible frequently points out how absurd it is to bow down to gods who are not really there.

Yet for Moses nothing could be further from the truth, because of course he met with God and had seen his glory. To Moses, worship was enthralling, it glorified and edified him, and even made him super-human.

He did not miss food and drink for 6 weeks, such was the sustaining power of being in God's presence. And when he came down the mountain, it was as though some of God's glory had rubbed off on him – for now he was literally radiating light!

This was no nuclear accident with a massive overdose of lethal radiation, like the old jokes following Chernobyl of people glowing in the dark. This was Moses getting close to what he was created to be. Not a dull and listless character, dwelling in a world of shadows. But a glorious and powerful one, destined to live in a land of light.

We occasionally read of people glowing as Moses did, but this is the only time a mere mortal radiates in this way. More usually it is angels or even Christ himself, such as in the Transfiguration. While on the one hand this is clearly symbolic, showing just how pure and holy God is compared to anything in this world, it is also fascinating to think of what it means in terms of the physical reality of heaven. For heaven is not just a spiritual place; we will not be disembodied spirits floating through the ether, but will occupy a place more real and more solid than what we call the "real world" today. Interestingly, glowing skin is often a favourite in science-fiction films too, where the "immeasurably superior" aliens have a spooky glow about them.

Now God describes himself as light [1 John 1:5], and in heaven there is no need for the sun to give us light. We are used to living in a world where the default is darkness, but God dwells in everlasting light – the default, if you like, is light. Clearly Moses' glowing skin was related to the time he spent with God – his glory faded after he had been away from God's presence for some time, but came back when he met with God again.

At first, Moses was not even aware that his face was glowing – until Aaron and the rest shrank back in fear. This was quite a natural reaction; I'm sure we would shrink back in fear if Paul had returned from his holidays with a holy glow. As it happens, he returned from holidays wearing a head to toe skeleton suit, but that's another story!

Veiling the glory

Now if Moses needed any sign to demonstrate that he was God's chosen leader, and that they should listen to him, then his shining face would more than suffice. Who could doubt that his words came from God, when he addressed them with such radiance? Perhaps they looked on Moses with a new respect, for it must be difficult to oppose someone who so obviously has God's favour.

Maybe Moses rather liked this new status. Maybe he was afraid that if the Israelites saw that his own glory faded, then they would be more likely to cause him trouble. Or maybe he simply wanted to stop them staring rudely at him while his face still shone. Whatever the reason, Moses chose to put a veil over his face after he had addressed the people, so that they would see the radiance fading away.

Regulations from the Relationship

Now I don't intend to go into much detail on the rest of this section, for virtually all the regulations here are repeated elsewhere. But I do want to point this out: all of these rules and regulations, which at first sight may seem a bit arbitrary, make perfect sense given the relationship with God which Moses had, and which God wants with the rest of the people.

Take the Sabbath. If God is the centre of our lives, then we will want to spend time with him. He is more important than any other activity we are engaged in; no matter how pressing any other engagement is, it is not so important as spending time with God. So for the Israelites, even during the critical times of seed-time and harvest – when a day could make the difference between a successful harvest and a poor one – even then they were to stop what they were doing to spend time with God.

In part this was a sign of their priorities, that God was more important to them than the harvest. And in part it was a demonstration of faith – that God would not let them starve from a poor harvest, as they might not be able to gather it in before the wind or the rains struck.

This idea that God was to be their number one priority runs through all the regulations, whether it be against idolatry, celebrating God's feasts, or offering sacrifices.

The nature of the sacrifices can strike us as odd. Why kill the firstborn of your donkey? One of our secretaries where I work keeps a swear-box in aid of a donkey sanctuary, and would be appalled at the thought of an innocent young donkey having its neck broken just because it was the first-born. Outwith the context of God's relationship to his people, this does seem bizarre.

In a society where wealth and status was measured by the amount of live-stock you had, it would be easy to get carried away by the pursuit of livestock as an end in itself – just as today many people get carried away by the pursuit of fast cars or cool clothes. But more so, animals are not things, they are living creatures – and the principle had to be established that all life belongs to God.

Offering the firstborn to God showed, again, both where their priorities and their faith lay. God received the first from their flock – showing that their relationship with God was more important than their wealth or their livelihood. It also showed that they placed faith in God to keep their animals well so that they could breed again.

There is another lesson that the humble donkey would teach them, a lesson which is as relevant now as it was then. The firstborn donkey had to be given to the Lord; but it could not be sacrificed, for it was an unclean animal. But another animal could be sacrificed in its stead. The donkey's life could be spared, but not by paying a price in money; the price had to be another life – in this case, a lamb. The lamb's death would allow the donkey to live.

Of course, God's real concern is not animals but people, and the same principle applies to us. We need someone to die in our stead if we are to be able to live – and praise God, that is exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Priorities and Faith

Today, we are not living in the same culture as Moses. We are not part of God's chosen race, the Jews. We are not to follow a set of rituals and ceremonies which point ahead to the coming of Christ. But those two principles remain: our relationship with God must come first in our lives; and we must place our faith in him, and not in ourselves.

How this works out in practice is, to an extent, up to each of us to work out as God guides us through his Holy Spirit. So when we consider Bob tomorrow evening, we should all be looking for God's will to be done rather than our own; and we should have faith in His ability to let his will be done, rather than worrying about whether he will get enough votes given that 75% of all members most vote in favour.

Outside of this very specific area, the same principles should apply in our lives. Do we give God the *first* of everything in our lives – the first of our time, the first of our talents, the first of our money and resources? Or do we let him make do with whatever is left at the end of the day, or at the end of the month or at the end of our lives?

Do we place our trust in God for our peace, security and livelihood, or are we constantly striving to do more ourselves, to gain more possessions and wealth so that we can be more secure and happy?

It is difficult to avoid, especially in our materialistic and self-centred society. And the key to avoiding it is found in this chapter too: spending more time with God. Because God is so great, because he is so faithful and so loving, we cannot help but make him our Number 1 priority when we are in his presence, we cannot help but place our faith in him. The closer we are to God, the more everything else in life fits into place.

Of course, this is easier said than done. There are often – if not always – distractions which would prevent us from spending time with God. But if we are to make any progress in our relationship with Him, we must find ways of doing so – for like any relationship, it will wither if it receives no attention.

Longing to be close

Now have you ever felt so close to God, perhaps in a time of prayer, that you didn't want to stop? Have you had times when God has felt so close, that you long to have that experience again? Have you ever enjoyed the fellowship, the worship, the ministry at Chapel or at some larger more special event so much, that you wish you could stay there for ever?

I remember when I had been a Christian for just a couple of years, back as a teenager on the Isle of Arran. I wasn't used to times of real fellowship, simply because there weren't many other believers around. But one summer, a visiting team from some Christian organisation – I think it might have been Faith Mission - held some rallies on the other side of the island, which I was able to go to. I remember being so impressed by the atmosphere, particularly afterwards back at someone's house, where we talked about all sorts of Christian things till quite late in the evening. I didn't want to go home!

I expect it must have been even more hard for Moses to go back down the mountain to the people, after being so close to God.

But he had a job to do. God had called him up the mountain for a purpose. He had revealed so much about himself and his plans for his people for a purpose – and that was not simply for Moses to bask in God’s glory. Moses had to return to his people, to set up the Tabernacle and all the ceremony around it, and reveal to them as much of God’s plans as they could understand.

Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians that, for all the closeness to God that Moses knew, the covenant which he introduced was dull and lifeless compared to the new covenant which Jesus brought:

2 Corinthians 3:7-18:

⁷ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹ And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

There will come a time when we can enjoy God’s presence for ever; when we too can reflect God’s glory on our faces, when we thrill at unbroken and intimate fellowship with God. We may get the odd foretaste of that now, and it is only natural to want those times to be more frequent and longer lasting. But now is not the time for us to be in heaven. Now is the time for us to be on earth, to be amongst the people whom God loves and longs to redeem. Now is the time for us to reveal as much of God’s love to those around us as they can understand. And to learn from the knocks we receive along the way, so that we too understand God more fully as we go through our lives.