

Exodus 33:18-23

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Moses needed a visible sign that would confirm the LORD's promised presence, so he asked Him to make Himself visible to him. The LORD answered Him by allowing Moses to see His back but not His face.

Moses is on a roll, and he keeps going. So far, God has granted all that he has asked. God just granted to Moses his petition to restore His presence to Israel as they trekked to the Promised Land. God told Moses the reason He granted the request for Israel was because God so greatly favored Moses. Moses also had expressed a desire to “know Your ways” (v. 13). Now Moses asks not only to know God’s ways, but to know Him.

Moses starts this intercession by asking the LORD, “*I pray You, show me Your glory!*” Though he had seen the LORD’s earlier works (the pillar cloud, etc.), he now wanted to see His *glory*. The word *glory* generally refers to someone or something’s observable essence. [1 Corinthians 15:41](#) tells us that the sun has a glory and the moon has a glory, and their glory differs, because their observable essence differs. In Philippians, Paul says of those who have become enemies of the cross of Christ that their “glory is their shame, who set their mind on earthly things” ([Philippians 3:19](#)). In each case, the essence is visible to observers.

Prior to the giving of His law, the LORD promised Moses and Aaron that they would “see the glory of the LORD” ([Exodus 16:7](#)). Moses and the Israelites saw the “glory” of God covering Mount Sinai ([Exodus 24:16 – 17](#)) that appeared as a “cloud.” Again, the essence was visible. Here, Moses is speaking “face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (vs. 11). Now Moses makes a personal request, to see His *glory*.

There are several places in the Bible where someone could see the *glory* of the LORD. Isaiah mentioned this in [Isaiah 35:2](#), where God’s *glory* will be seen through the blooming of the desert. [Psalm 19](#) says the heavens tell of the *glory* of God; humans can see God’s essence by observing what He created. This principle is echoed in [Romans 1:20](#). Ezekiel recorded that he “looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” ([Ezekiel 44:4](#)). In the New Testament, Luke recorded that “when they [Peter, James, and John] were fully awake, they saw His glory” referring to the

glorified appearance of Jesus ([Lk. 9:32](#)). Jesus, when confronting Martha at the raising of Lazarus, told her that if she believed, she would “see the glory of God,” referring to the miracle of resurrection she was about to witness ([John 11:40](#)).

The first part of the LORD’s answer to Moses’ petition to see His *glory* is in verse 19. The LORD answered Moses by telling him, *I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you*. The LORD stated that He would have His “goodness” pass before Moses. This could mean that God would show Moses one characteristic—a part, but not all, of His entire essence. This is probably because it is responsive to what Moses really desires, and all Moses can handle.

As His *goodness* would pass by, God would *proclaim the name of the Lord*. The LORD’s *name* is a reference to His character. It seems God chose one aspect of His glory for Moses to observe—*goodness*. This seems appropriate given that God has been disciplining Israel, and God wants to assure Moses that He has the best interest of Abraham’s descendants at heart.

One aspect of God’s character is His sovereignty. He told Moses that *I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion*. God will show His *goodness*, but that *goodness* will be decided by God. It is not a commodity that can be acquired through a transaction. He Himself decides who would be the recipients of His grace and compassion.

Paul quotes verse 19 in [Romans 9:15](#) when answering the inferred accusation that his teaching leads to the conclusion that God has rejected Israel, making God unjust. Paul is adamant that this is not the case. God is wholly just. “There is no injustice with God,” Paul says, because, as God said to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” ([Romans 9:14b-15](#)). Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, and today and forever ([Hebrews 13:9](#)).

The next part of the LORD’s answer was a direct response to Moses’ wish to see the *glory* (or essence) of the LORD. What Moses was allowed to see was restricted. He told Moses that he *cannot see* His *face*, the reason being that *no man can see Him and live*. Again, God is gracious. In His benevolence He does not fully grant Moses’ request, as is often the case. When God says “No” we often don’t know why He says “No.” In this instance He explains why: it would cause Moses’ death.

But, in His grace, the LORD provided a way for Moses to experience His *glory*. He told Moses that *there is a place by Me*, and at this *place* he was to *stand there on the rock*. The *rock*, as seen in other Scriptures, was a symbol of the LORD's presence and a source of security ([Deuteronomy 32:4](#); [Psalms 18:2, 41:3, 95:1](#)). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is called the *rock* ([Romans 9:33](#); [1 Corinthians 10:4](#)).

The LORD told Moses what was going to happen. He said *while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock*. Notice that it was the LORD that put Moses *in the cleft of the rock*. This was a place of safety, a crevice in the *rock* that would protect Moses. Not only that, but the LORD would *cover* Moses with His *hand* (lit. "palm") *until I have passed by*, thus ensuring that Moses would not see His face and die.

After the LORD had passed by, He said that He would *take His hand away*. This would allow Moses to see His *back*. The LORD repeated, however, that His *face shall not be seen*. So, Moses was allowed to see the LORD's *glory* from behind, but not His *face*.

To see what Moses was allowed to see was an honor given to only a few in the Bible. In this chapter, God honored Moses by listening to Moses and granting three petitions. The first two petitions had to do with Moses' job as the leader and intercessor for Israel. The last, to see God's *glory*, seemed simply an exuberant desire that stemmed from Moses' enthusiasm to know God. Moses was the most humble man in all the earth ([Numbers 12:3](#)) which means he had the greatest ability to see reality for what it is (the essence of humility).

Moses understood what Jesus explained in [John 17](#), that the greatest experience available in this life is to know God ([John 17:3](#)). Jesus described knowing God as "eternal life." This would not be the free gift of new birth, which comes through faith ([John 3:14-16](#)), but rather the experience of knowing God. Moses had this desire, and asked to see God's glory. And it is instructive that God granted his request, although it was simply a personal desire. Obviously God respected and liked Moses. This illustrates also that God understands our deepest desires better than we do, and would have them fulfilled in a manner that exceeds our capacity to comprehend.

The New Testament also underscores what Moses knew, that knowing God is the ultimate experience that leads to fulfilling our deepest desires. But this is best done through faith. Jesus showed the Apostle Thomas the nail prints in his hands and side to prove to Thomas it was truly Him who has risen from

the grave. When Jesus did this Thomas believed. But then Jesus stated that those who believed without having to see would receive a greater blessing ([John 20:29](#)). Similarly, Jesus told His disciples that it “is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper (Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” ([John 16:7](#)). The Bible is clear that knowing God by faith is a particularly amazing opportunity that only comes in this life.

In Heaven, we will know God by sight. In fact, Paul uses the phrase “face to face” to describe how we will know God, perhaps with Moses’ experience in mind (1 Corinthians 13: 12). In Heaven, however, it does not seem God will have to hide His face for those redeemed by the Lamb of God. That means that it is in this life only that we have the opportunity to gain the experience of eternal life, the ultimate fulfillment of life, through knowing God **by faith**. Each believer has the opportunity to know God in a similar manner to Moses, coming to know His ways, seeing His glory through His work in and around us, and yielding to the Holy Spirit, the Helper that Jesus sent, and following Him as though He were a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

Biblical Text:

¹⁸ Then Moses said, “I pray You, show me Your glory!” ¹⁹ And He said, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”

²⁰ But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” ²¹ Then the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; ²² and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. ²³ Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.”