

The Face of Moses

Exodus 34:29-35

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 34. Tonight we come to the end of our study of the golden calf incident. These very last verses, these verses at the end of chapter 34, exalt the mediator Moses. Now this began in Exodus 32:1, "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make us a God who will go before us.'" They didn't think Moses was coming back so they thought they needed another mediating leader and so they asked for a statue instead of Moses. "As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Even in English, that translates to be a pretty cold way to talk about a man who has risked his life for you. And especially in the original language, it's an extremely disrespectful way of speaking about someone in a position of authority. So this whole story of the golden calf begins with the people denigrating Moses, the people taking him for granted, and the people not realizing how significant his role was for them as mediator.

The whole story from Exodus 32, verse 2 on to Exodus 34, let's us know that without the mediator Moses, Israel is in big trouble. Moses is the one standing in between them and what they deserve. Moses is the one standing in between them and immediate judgment. Moses is the one standing in between them and death. Moses is the one standing in between them and being extinguished right there in the wilderness. So the whole passage shows the crucialness of Moses the mediator, despite the fact the people had discounted him. And the end of the passage actually exalts Moses the mediator, and that is what we're going to look at in Exodus 34, beginning in verse 29.

And it came about when Moses was coming down from Mt. Sinai and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hands as he was coming down the mountain, that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers in the congregation returned to him; and Moses spoke to them. And afterward all the sons of Israel came near, and he commanded them

to do everything that the Lord had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel, he spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded, the sons of Israel would see the face of Moses that the skin of Moses' face shown. So Moses would replace the veil over his face until he went in to speak with Him.”

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, this is your word; we thank you for it. As we study it together tonight, we pray that our hearts would exalt the Mediator to whom Moses witnessed and of who Moses was but a faint shadow. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is another glorious passage. It's a passage that you have probably heard sermons on before. It's the famous passage when Moses' face shines from being in the presence of the Almighty God on Mount Sinai. You can already tell the parallels to the first time that Moses was at Mount Sinai from the description that we've just read. But there are several things I'd like us to focus on. For one thing, I want you to see ironically in this context of the exaltation of Moses as the mediator. I want you to see the humility of Moses here. Moses' humility is striking in this setting. Secondly, I want you to see the exaltation of a humble mediator. Moses, this man who we will see to be humble, is exalted by the Lord in this passage. Thirdly, I want you to see two visible manifestations of God's continuing covenant grace to, and presence with, His people. You remember the thing that the people feared the most realizing their own sins, realizing what they deserved, was that God was going to cut them off from the covenant and that He was going to cease to be present with them. And in this passage we see a manifestation of God's mercy and love in His continuing in the covenant and in His continuing to be present with them. And fourth and finally, I want you to see the foreshadowing of a more glorious mediator in this passage.

I. Moses' humility and unselfconsciousness.

In verse 29, we see the mediator manifesting bodily his communion with the Lord. The fact that Moses had been with the Lord is seen bodily in his face; his face is shining from being in the presence of the Lord and yet, the thing that strikes you about verse 29, is not this glorious experience which has left an indelible impression upon Moses' visage, what strikes you is his humility—his unselfconsciousness of it all.

Finally Moses is returning; he's coming down from the peak of Sinai; he's bringing with him again the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments

are written, but something's very different this time. This time, we are told in verse 29, that his face is dramatically shining. His face is shining so dramatically that it scares the living daylights out of Aaron, the men and the congregation of Israel so that they do something not unlike what they did the last time they heard God speak. You remember the result of God speaking the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai was that everybody ran away and they had to be called back. And here, it happens again. Twice they have to be called back to Moses' presence. They see this man's face and rays of life are emanating from his face, and yet he's completely unaware of it. This radiance is the effect of God's glorious presence with him in communion. It's a visible sign of the answer of God to Moses' prayer. You remember Moses said, "Show me Your face." And the Lord had passed before him and shown him His back. But Moses had communed with the Lord in a way that no one else had and so the glorious presence of the Lord has left this impression, this visible manifestation, on Moses. The old Latin version of the Bible mistranslated the word that Moses' face shown and translated it as *Moses' grew horns out of his face*. And so you will find in the Middle Ages lots of paintings of Moses with horns and that's where that comes from. The Latin translation erroneously said that Moses grew horns. That would have scared the people, no doubt, had Moses come down the mountain with horns. But the point is here not that Moses grew horns, but that *Moses' face shown*. Remember, that little play on words, however, because the play on words between *shone* and *horns* actually comes to bear in this passage.

The significance of this is that in ancient cultures in Mesopotamia, one of the things that kings often claimed as an attestation of their own divinity, their own relationships with the gods, was a shining radiance about them. And in granting Moses this radiance, God is exalting him in a way that everybody in that culture would have understood. Kings that claim to be divine made this kind of claim to supernatural radiance, and God is showing this to the children of Israel who, in Exodus 32: couldn't even call this man's name. God says, "This is My mediator; I have chosen him, I have exalted him in your eyes."

But the striking thing that I want to emphasize is that Moses is totally clueless about this. He is totally unselfconscious. His closeness to God, his communion with God has left him utterly humble. After all, you remember the words of Numbers 12:3, that describe Moses as the meekest man on earth. Well, here we see an example of that. If a modern minister had had an experience of communion with God such that his face was shining, he would be on Oprah the next morning, selling books. But not Moses. He doesn't even know it. He doesn't know why everyone is running, scattering, as he comes down the mountain. Show me an arrogant spiritual leader, and I'll show you a person who has an immature faith and is unfamiliar with the presence of God. But show me someone who's dwelling in the presence of God, and I'll show you a humble person. Here's Moses who's been communing with God, and he's humble. There's a huge lesson in that. Humility is true spiritual greatness, and we see an example of it here in Moses

II. Moses is feared and exalted. God's word is magnified and the people assured.

Then, if you'll look at verses 30-33, we see the response of the people to the radiance of Moses' appearance. Moses is clueless about this, but the peoples' response is fairly dramatic. Moses is feared as he comes down the mountain. Moses is exalted by God as he comes down the mountain, and by exalting Moses, God's word is exalted and His people, ironically, though they're scared at first, are assured of God's love to them because of this manifestation in Moses' face. The reaction of Israel, if you look at verse 30, to the shining face of Moses, is precisely their reaction to God's manifestation and His voice at Mt. Sinai before: They were afraid to come near him. They have to be called back to him. They ran away. They're scared to death, so they run. God's methods of assurance can be terrifying.

The reason God is doing this is to assure the children of Israel. They had a reason to fear God's judgment. They deserved it. All of us have a reason to fear God's judgment. We deserve it. But the way God was going to assure them that they need not fear, was terrifying, and it begins with this manifestation of Moses. So in verses 30-33, Moses speaks to the people with this radiance visible, and that radiance attests to the people of God two things: he is the mediator, and they really need him, and God's word is something that really needs to be listened to.

There is a play on words here. In the original, shone, Moses' face shone, is the Hebrew word *karan*. The Hebrew word *keren*, is the word for horn. What's the play? The mediator that the people built had horns, but the mediator that God gave to the people, shone with the radiance of God's presence. What's God doing? There was your mediator, it was inanimate, it was made from trinkets, it could not talk, it could not walk, it could not lead, it could not mediate; in fact, it just about brought down My judgment on you. Here's My mediator, and his face shines because he's been in the presence of God. The very thing you wanted your handmade mediator to do, to bring God's presence, almost cost you God's presence forever. Now, I'm sending My mediator back to you, and he's shining with the presence of My glory. It's a beautiful play on words, as God says, "this is My mediator; you need him."

This not only distinguishes God's true mediator from the people's self-chosen mediator, the golden calf, the radiance also attests to the authority of God's word. Moses didn't cause this radiance, and in fact, the radiance faded the longer he was away from God. That's why Paul tells us in Corinthians that Moses veiled his face. You might think from this passage that the reason Moses veiled his face was to keep from scaring the people, because we're told that the people were scared by the radiance. But did you notice, whenever Moses came back from

Sinai to speak to the people, he did not veil his face. He only veiled his face after he spoke to the people, and Paul tells us the reason he veiled the face was so that the people would not see the radiance fade away and then begin to doubt the very lesson they had learned in seeing the radiance in the first place. So the radiance of Moses serves to attest to the authority of God's word. Notice in verses 31-32, who is it that draws near? The rulers in the congregation and all the sons of Israel. That's Moses' way of saying, "Everybody came near to me when I spoke the words of God." Why is that significant? All of Israel draws near, to stress that God's word is not just for the elite, but it's for all of God's people. All of God's people need to hear the word of God, and that radiance of Moses' face simply attests to the authority of God's word to His people. So the response of the people to Moses is to recognize his authority as the mediator, and to recognize the authority of the word that he speaking. His shining face was designed, among other things, to witness to God's presence with Israel that is for their good and their assurance.

And so, isn't it beautiful here that Moses who starts out this passage maligned, is exalted by God in this visible manifestation, recalling the words of 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honor Me, I will honor," and the words of James 4:10: "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and He will exalt you." Well, Moses is the poster child for that. He's God's faithful mediator. He's humbled. He's been dwelling the presence of the Lord. He's humbled but the Lord exalts him. People can run him down but the Lord exalts him before the people.

And there is a three-fold purpose to this radiance. To exalt the mediator in their eyes, to magnify the importance of God's word and to assure the people of God's continuing presence. Moses is like a singular representative of the fact that God is going to dwell with His people. After the tabernacle is built and placed right in the center of Israel, the shekina glory is going to come down and fill it; it's going to glow with the glory of God. And Moses is a walking, talking, singular representation of that shekina glory—the radiance of God. The fact that he comes down out of the mountain with this radiance is just again assuring the people of God. "I've heard Moses' intercession for you, and not only am I not going to destroy you, and not only am I going to continue My covenant promises to you but I'm going to be present with you even though you don't deserve it and I'm going to do it because My mediator interceded for you." The awe inspiring radiance emitted by Moses' face is the afterglow of the diving presence and it served to reaffirm and to legitimate the prophet's role as the peerless mediator of God, the sole and singular mediator between God and His people. And it also goes to show the restoration of God's divine favor to His people. So that's the second thing that we see here.

III. Moses' fading glory hidden.

But there's a third thing too, in verses 34 and 35. Moses the mediator's ongoing

experience of the presence of God and the consequent radiance is recorded here. This wasn't just a one-time thing. Apparently, every time that Moses went up to commune with the Lord, when he came back his face was in this condition. In verse 34, when Moses was communing with God or speaking to the people delivering God's word, we are told two things: his face continued to shine and his face was unveiled. When he was in God's presence, his face was unveiled; when he was speaking as a public figure as the mediator of God's people to all God's people, his face was unveiled. And that radiance, though it initially frightened them, was designed to attest to the message and the messenger and to assure them of God's presence.

Now, of course, the radiance of Moses here is clearly something that foreshadows the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. When you read this passage, Moses coming down from the mountain with this radiant glory shining in His face, you have to think about Matthew 17 or Luke 9 and the transfiguration passages. And it's even more interesting, isn't it? When Jesus' transfigured glory is shown on the mountain, notice that who is there talking with Him? Moses. And there's no mistaking that.

The mediatorial glory of Moses is clearly something that foreshadows Jesus. That's Paul's whole point in 2 Corinthians 3. This Old Testament passage is pointing to the transfiguration of Christ. You see, this passage provided the background for one of Paul's major comments on our privileges of believers living in the new covenant in comparison to the old covenant. Moses' fading glory was hidden by the veil. When he was with God or speaking for God to the people, the glory shone. When he was not, however, he veiled himself and the radiance faded away.

Paul picks up on that very thought and meditates upon it in 2 Corinthians 3:1 and then verses 5 to 18. "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? Our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more doth the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed, what had glory in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains *is* in glory. Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in *our* speech, and *are* not like Moses, *who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over his heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now, the

Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

IV. Jesus’ transfigured glory will never fade, but will rather be yet more unveiled.

Now, what Paul is saying in this passage, and this is the fourth thing I wanted to say to you tonight, is that the glory of the old covenant and its mediator, can't match the glory of the new covenant and its Mediator. Jesus’ transfigured glory will never fade, but will rather, be yet more unveiled. When Jesus came, His glory was veiled in the flesh. What we see in the transfiguration is what Jesus is really like. We see just a little glimpse of what He is really like.

When you go to the Book of Revelation, and you get that description of Jesus, it doesn't sound like anything that you would associate with the earthly Jesus. The earthly Jesus, of course, never is described in the gospels. And of course, the description of Jesus in Revelation is designed to be symbolic; it's designed to draw your attention to certain truths that are embedded in the Old Testament itself, but it stresses beautifully that you can't capture the glory of Jesus. His glory will be yet more unveiled. And by this appeal, the apostle Paul is showing that Jesus is our Mediator. His glory is inherent; it is not derived; and therefore, it is permanent; it doesn't fade away. Moses’ glory went away. Moses was a great mediator. Moses was the instrument of God. Without Moses Israel doesn't exist. Without Moses nothing else happens in the story of God's dealings with His people because Moses was the instrument that God chose to use to perpetuate His dealings with His people. But he is nothing like Jesus. His glory is not inherent; it is derived. His glory is the leftover vestiges of being with God—not Jesus’ glory. In Him is all glory. “He is full of grace and truth,” John says in John, chapter 1. “And we beheld His glory which was the glory as of the only begotten Son of God.” Jesus’ glory is inherent; it's not derived. It's permanent, it's not temporary. And so the apostle Paul is telling us that Moses points us to Christ. That's what he's complaining about in 2 Corinthians 3. He's talking about people that love the Law of Moses but they don't see Christ in the Law of Moses. And he is saying that until you see Christ, the veil remains over your eyes. But when you see Christ, the veil is lifted.

How is Christ displayed in the Law of Moses? Well, in a thousand ways, but one way He is displayed in Moses’ mediation, because the law didn't save Israel. If the law was going to save Israel, then Israel would not be here. It's the mediator that saves Israel. That's how you see Christ in this passage. The mediator saves Israel from the broken law, and the apostle Paul says until you see that, you haven't really understood the glory of the old covenant; you haven't really understood the glory of the gospel; you haven't really appreciated the glory of

Christ. So the apostle Paul says if you study Exodus 34, right then the One you're going to think about is Jesus. Because you too, just like the children of Israel, deserve to have your sins judged. You deserve to be condemned.

As you look over at those images of some of the hoodlums that are in operation in the Middle East right now and you get rightly indignant, do you realize that you deserve God's indignation just like they deserve your indignation? And the apostle Paul is saying, "You need a Mediator. And the mediator you need isn't Moses. The Mediator you need is Jesus because His glory is unfading. And unlike Moses, He died for you." And that's what we learn when we look at Exodus 34. We see the exaltation of a humble mediator. We see God witness to the message and the messenger, and we see a beautiful pointing to the real Mediator, Jesus Christ. Let's trust in Him. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. Help us we pray, by Your Spirit, to open our eyes. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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