

LEAD! A.4 God's Character

[Renumbering so we can start at 1, instead of 0]

In Which We Discover What God Looks Like, And Why Moses Wants to See More of Him

Continuing our discussion of God's **name** -- which we are supposed to be [baptized](#) into -- we turn from the incommunicable aspects of His [identity](#) to the communicable aspects of His character.

Adoration

[Psalm 103](#)

Bible

[Exodus 33:11–34:7](#)

This passage is actually the fulfillment of the [promise](#) made in the [previous lesson](#), of Moses and the Israelites worshipping God on that same mountain. The Israelites have pitched a tent, where Moses meets with Yahweh:

And the LORD spake unto Moses [face](#) to face, as a man speaketh unto his [friend](#). And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.

Despite this close relationship with God, and all the deliverances he has experienced, Moses appears to still be preoccupied with the [same question](#) of who God is:

And Moses said unto the [LORD](#), See, thou [savest](#) unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt [send](#) with me. Yet thou hast said, I [know](#) thee by [name](#), and thou hast also found [grace](#) in my sight.

Specifically, Moses is asking about God's [behavior](#), not just His identity:

Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy [way](#), that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation [is] thy people.

God's answer is surprising:

And he said, My [presence](#) shall go [with thee], and I will give thee [rest](#).

I suppose that is one way to answer the question: God's "way" is to a) be there, and b) grant rest. Moses seems to accept that as an appropriate answer — or rather, consider it too good to be true:

And he said unto him, If thy presence go not [with me], carry us not up hence.

Why make such a big deal about God's presence?

For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found [grace](#) in thy sight? [is it] not in that thou [goest](#) with us? so shall we be [separated](#), I and thy people, from all the people that [are] upon the face of the earth.

Clearly, Moses understands that *their* unique identity as a people is wholly dependent on God being present among them. God appears to appreciate this response:

And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found [grace](#) in my sight, and I know thee by [name](#).

Wow, a powerful statement! Thus emboldened, Moses ups the ante:

And he said, I beseech thee, [shew](#) me thy [glory](#).

Glory is a powerful word, which can be [defined](#) as a “highly praiseworthy asset”, or “the best attributes thereof.” Moses wants to know God at His best; a request God promises to grant:

And he said, I will make all my [goodness](#) pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be [gracious](#) to whom I will be gracious, and will shew [mercy](#) on whom I will shew mercy.

While God promises to *show* His glory later, He gives Moses a few hints right now. First of all, God appears to equate His *glory* with His *goodness*; we could even take this as a definition: God's glory is everything that is good about Him.

Secondly, God asserts what might be called His “[sovereign discretion](#)”: His freedom to choose to whom He acts with graciousness and mercy (also [translated](#) as kindness, compassion, favor and love). At this point, it is unclear whether that statement is part of His name, or simply God telling Moses how lucky he was that God chose to reveal Himself to him!

Though even that revelation comes with one caveat:

And he said, Thou canst not see my [face](#): for there shall no man see me, and live.

This doesn't mean that God has a [physical body](#) we can't see (after all, we humans were allowed to see Christ's face, at least for a time). Rather, seeing God's face represents [deep intimacy](#), deeper even than talking to God [face-to-face](#).

In this case, it means an experience of God's presence that was too glorious for Moses to handle. Though, He will allow Moses to see a portion of His glory:

And the LORD said, Behold, [there is] a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:

And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:

And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my [back parts](#): but my face shall not be seen.

Just as we see life as the “[backside of a tapestry](#)”, so Moses could only see the “back side” of God's glory; the totality of His grandeur and grace is too beautiful for him to comprehend.

Yet to even see that much requires special preparation:

And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon [these] tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou [brakest](#).

Here, God harkens back a couple chapters to the [ugly scene](#) where Moses, upon discovering that the Israelites had made a [golden calf](#) idol during his absence, broke the tablets in his anger. It isn't clear whether God is condoning or condemning Moses' actions, but either way Moses needed to (almost literally) pick up the pieces and start over.

And be [ready](#) in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and [present](#) thyself there to me in the top of the mount.

And whatever he was going to experience, it would have to be on his own:

And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount.

God appears to be serious about His “no one can see me and live” prohibition; Moses certainly takes Him seriously:

And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone.

There is something stirring about the image of Moses walking up a mountain in the early morning mist carrying two blank tablets of stone, almost like a blank check for God to fill out. Perhaps that very emptiness and vulnerability was a necessary precondition for God to reveal Himself:

And the [LORD](#) descended in the [cloud](#), and [stood](#) with him there, and [proclaimed](#) the [name](#) of the LORD.

But unlike on Moses' [first visit](#) to Sinai, the name revealed here is more than just “I am”:

And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The [LORD](#), The LORD [God](#),

[merciful](#) and [gracious](#), [longsuffering](#), and [abundant](#) in [goodness](#) and [truth](#),

That's quite a list. We could [break this down](#) as:

1. "[I AM](#)."
2. "I am [God](#)"
3. "I am [merciful](#)"
4. "I am [gracious](#)"
5. "I am [longsuffering](#)" (or, "I am slow to [anger](#)")
6. "I [abound](#) in [goodness](#)"
7. "I abound in [truth](#)"

This is a powerful set of attributes. Whole books could be (and have been) written about each of these; see the hyperlinks above for a taste. For this study, we will content ourselves with a few simple observations:

- The first two attributes remind us of God's transcendent nature.
- The next two emphasize His [beneficence](#); not giving us the punishment we *do* deserve, while giving us the blessings we *don't*
- The fifth item hints that God may still sometimes punish us, but only as a last resort
- The last two picture God as a fountain overflowing in truth and goodness

Try to imagine what this must've mean for Moses. He has experienced humiliation, honor, triumph, and tragedy since he first set foot in the presence of God. Now he's responsible for [hundreds of thousands](#) of families -- most of whom have shown themselves all too willing to forget (and anger) God at the least provocation!

Under the circumstances, Moses well knew that what he needed most was a deeper understanding of what the God he had entrusted himself was like. He needed to know that God loved the Israelites even more than Moses himself did, and was willing to put up with their inevitable foibles.

Not that He ignores sin, but that His forgiveness outshines His justice:

[Keeping mercy](#) for thousands, [forgiving iniquity](#) and [transgression](#) and [sin](#), and that will by no means [clear](#) [the guilty]; [visiting](#) the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth [generation].

Yes, God is just, as the Israelites recently learned to their sorrow. He will not be mocked, but will even reckon the sins of fathers to their children.

Yet God's mercy and forgiveness [extend further](#) than even than His justice. And in fact, His character is most fully revealed by the grace He shows to them -- us -- who least deserve it.

Conversation

1. Why do you think, of all the things he could've asked for, Moses was most desperate for God's **presence**?
2. Do you think we as New Testament Christians can see God's face, and not just his backside? [Why](#) or [why not](#)?
3. If you were in Moses' position, which aspect of God's character would you find most comforting? Which aspect do you find most comforting **now**?
4. How do you personally reconcile God's mercy with God's justice?
5. In what ways (if any) do you think we suffer for [our parents sins](#)?
6. How do these attributes impact your understanding of what it means to be baptized *into* God's name?

Decision

- Repentance: What "blank tablets" do you need to bring to God, to allow Him to reveal His character to you?
- Action: How must you [apprehend](#) God's presence in order to serve the people you lead?
- Worship: Which of God's attributes do you most want to lift up in praise right now?

Explore

- [Bible.org: The "Backside" of God \(Exodus 33:18-34:9\)](#)
- [Exodus 33-34:10 C'mon, Go With me « Radically Happy](#)
- [Attributes of God](#)
- [Bible.org: The Names of God](#)
- [YouTube – THIRD DAY – SHOW ME YOUR GLORY – LIVE](#)

For Next Week

Read [Romans 8](#). How is God's glory revealed by the workings of each person of the Trinity?