

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 33:1-23
“Stiff-Necked vs. Favored”

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Exodus 33:1-23

Verse 1-3

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

- The Lord has just pronounced judgment on Israel for making and worshipping the golden calf. However, he remains bound to his word. He promised to give the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Since he is bound by his word, he will do what he has said that he will do even though the people have betrayed him. He will not go back on his word. See 2 Timothy 2:13.
- Moses is to continue to lead the people under the direction of God. God will send an angel to go before the people and drive away those who might oppose them. However, God declares that he will no longer accompany the people personally. He himself will not go with them.
- God specifically declares his reason for not accompanying the people. It is because they are “stiff-necked.” The term is used of an animal, a horse or a donkey, which cannot be turned by the rider. It is useless because it will not follow directions. God is saying that while Israel is given clear instructions, they do not do as they are told to do. Under such circumstances they risk his disfavor. He will not go with them because, under these circumstances, he may destroy them.

Verse 4-6

When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. For YHWH had said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.’” So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

- The people find the news that God will no longer be with them distressing. They assume the dress and attitude of mourning as a sign of their repentance.
- The word “ornaments” may mean jewelry but probably refers to any kind of “fancy” garment or manner of dressing. They dress plainly to show their sorrow for their bad behavior. As God ordered them to do so, this behavior is designed to show their compliance to his command.

Verse 7-11

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it Ohel-moed (“tent of meeting”). Anyone inquiring of YHWH would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while YHWH spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. YHWH would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

- Remember that while God had given Moses detailed instructions for the construction and placement of the Tabernacle, those instructions had not yet been followed. These verses describe the way things were before the Tabernacle was built.
- The *Ohel-moed* was a special tent that Moses had designed as a place where he and the people could go to meet with God. It was a special place of prayer of which God approved. God’s approval is expressed in his willingness to meet with Moses in this special place.
- A ritual developed around Moses going to this tent. The people would stand at the doors to their tents and watch Moses go to the tent of

meeting. They would see him enter it and then see the cloud, which symbolized God's presence in the camp, go and settle over the tent of meeting. This only happened when Moses went to the tent. It showed the people that he had a special relationship with God. God spoke to Moses directly and intimately as friend to friend. See John 15:12-17. When the people saw this they worshiped God.

Verse 12-13

Moses said to YHWH, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people"

- In one of these conversations with God in the tent of the meeting, Moses expresses three specific concerns to God:
 1. Moses is concerned that God is sending an unnamed angel to help Moses lead Israel. Moses wants to know the name of the angel.
 2. Moses has learned from the episode of the golden calf that God's favor is contingent upon obedience. The people have lost God's favor because they will not obey him. Therefore, Moses wants God to teach him the ways of God so that he can remain in the favor of God.
 3. He asks God to remember that Israel was the nation of God's choosing. In a very humble way, Moses is asking God to continue to be present with the people despite the attitude of disrespect the people have shown him.

Verse 14

YHWH replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

- God graciously grants Moses' request. As Moses has asked, God will continue to go with Israel, and in so doing, he will comfort Moses.

Verse 15-16

Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will

distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

- Moses acknowledges that there is nothing special about him as a person or about Israel as a nation except that God is with them. If they lose this distinction, they are as all the other people on the earth. God makes the difference!

Verse 17

And YHWH said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

- Again, God grants Moses’ request. He will stay with Israel on their journey. However, God makes it clear that he agrees to do this because of Moses. Moses, who intercedes for the people, has found favor with God. Therefore to honor Moses, God agrees to stay with Israel.

Verse 18

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

- God knows Moses intimately. God knows him by name. God sees his heart. Here, Moses asked to see the “glory of God.” He wants to see the heart of God, know the mind of God, enter into the substance of God. He is asking to be allowed a deep knowledge of who and what God is. He literally wants to see God as God is.

Verse 19-23

And YHWH said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, YHWH, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Then YHWH said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see by back; but my face must not be seen.”

- Moses is given special dispensation from God to look on the glory of God. Moses may not see the full splendor of God. He may not look God in the face. However, God will show Moses his glory as he pleases. God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and compassion on whom he will have compassion. He will let Moses see his glory.

- At the appointed time God will place Moses in a safe place and protect him with his own hand. When it is time, God will call Moses and let Moses see his glory as it passes. Moses will see the splendor of God as it fades because he could not endure it fully.
- When Moses is given this privilege he will be different and his life will be changed forever.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Stiff-Necked vs. Favored*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)