

“Show Me Your Glory”

A common problem translating the Bible into a tribal language is that the target language doesn't have a word that's needed to translate a passage. The Green Hmong dialect has no word for “glory.” So how then can Exodus 33:18 (“Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory’”) be translated? What word captures the essence of God's glory?

To answer this, we first need to ask, What exactly is that Moses is asking here? Is Moses simply asking to see God's ineffable brilliance, such as blinded Saul on the road to Damascus? It seems unlikely that Moses wants to have a spectacular sensory experience. After all, he has already personally been with God atop Mount Sinai. In the context here of the Golden Calf episode, for Moses to ask that God satisfy his curiosity about God's stupendous Person seems incongruous, almost bizarre. So, what is it that Moses wants? Let's briefly review the episode beginning in Exodus 32:

There evidently was misunderstanding as to exactly when Moses would return from atop Mount Sinai. Their fear may have been that Moses was not coming back to lead the nation. So (32:1) the Israelites requested an idol to lead them on, something visible and tangible to represent God. This was a flagrant violation of the 2nd Commandment, and it portends a tragic future history of idolatry and rebellion. God called this people “corrupt” and “stiff-necked” (vv.7,9) because they refused to respond to God's goodness and election as they should have. Interceding for the nation (32:11-14), Moses did not try to justify what they did, rather, he based his appeal on God's own personal character. Returning, Moses smashed the tablets (v. 19) because the covenant between the nation and God was broken; he smashed the idol, dramatically demonstrating its powerlessness, and made the people eat the powdered idol (v. 20) because they had to appropriate their rebellion. Moses interceded for Aaron, thus saving his life (we know this from Deut. 9:20). Moses then sent Levites into the camp to execute those who evidently were unrepentant and persisted in the idolatry (32:27-29). The sad chapter ends with Moses offering himself as an atonement to placate God's anger, but God rejected that offer. God has planned another, perfect atonement in the future.

Beginning in Exodus 33, it's evident that the relationship between God and His people is severely strained. There's now distance between God and Israel. Intimacy with Moses continued, but outside the camp. In 33:12ff, Moses again pleads for God to continue with the nation. And God showed Moses His glory by revealing His character. In the context of the intense drama of this Golden Calf episode, what Moses wants to know in 33:18 is, How is God going to deal with this rebellious people? Is He going to annihilate them? That is, after all, what they deserved. Is He going to abandon them in the wilderness? God surely can't simply ignore what happened. What Moses wants to know here is, “God, how great are you?” And God's answer is (to put it in one word), Grace.

“I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (33:19).

The word for “glory” in Hebrew is *kabod*, which also can be translated as “weight” or “heaviness.” God's greatness, His “weight” of greatness, is His grace. God is no moral light-weight. His “weight” or heaviness, is goodness. And His goodness is manifest as mercy and compassion, but let's call it by the New Testament term, grace. His extreme greatness is His grace. Grace is God's glory. Moses' request here in verse 18 highlights or brings to a focus the essence of all revelation. It's the core of all blessing. It's the basis of all salvation. The purpose of Scripture is to reveal God's glory.

Adam and his wife experienced God's grace. So did Noah, and so did the Patriarchs in Genesis. So did Moses. The Israelites didn't get what they should have gotten at the foot of Mount Sinai, which was total destruction. Instead, they got mercy and compassion. And, later on, so did David as well as many, many others who are named in Scripture. And much later on in time so did Paul, and so did you and me. If we've experienced grace, which is the outworking of God's perfect nature or character, God has shown us His glory.

In Exodus 34, there's a fresh start. But God's revelation of His character, of His glory, continues in vv. 5-7: **“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him [Moses] and proclaimed His name, the LORD. And He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished...’”** Although God is gracious and loving, He also is just; He necessarily punishes those who violate His righteous character. Justice is, after all, an aspect of goodness. Justice would demand that the nation of Israel be annihilated for their flagrant rebellion. Yet, they will receive grace. In God's “heavy” goodness, love and justice are perfectly expressed, thanks to the cross.

To know God's Name is to know Him, which is to know His extreme goodness. To see God's glory, which is what Moses requested, is to know Him as He is. God revealed to Moses His glory so that we might imitate or reflect that glory.

The purpose of Creation and the purpose of the Scriptures is for God's glory to be revealed. Going further, the purpose of human existence is to glorify God. How do we do that? By how we respond to God's goodness. The only appropriate response to God's glory is to fear Him. That's a huge word that includes a lot: it means to love Him, to trust Him, to obey Him, and to be loyal to Him. We should add, to give thanks to Him. But let's also add, to imitate Him. By imitating God, we reflect His goodness, indicating the value we place on His personal character of goodness. An infinite Being, God can be glorified only by Himself. That means when we imitate God's Person, for example, by showing grace to others and forgiving others, we glorify Him.

The rabbis of the Talmudic era understood from the Scriptures that imitating God was essential to their existence. They correctly said that Israel's great purpose and calling was two-fold, to serve God and to imitate Him. The N.T. authors carried this into the Church. The capacity to reflect God's glory, as a mirror reflects an image of someone, is innate. It's the "image of God" built into humans at creation. Let's think for a bit about the "image of God."

As the Persons of the Trinity are in relationship, so humans because of the image of God are social creatures, and we can be in relationship to God. The entry of sin unfortunately perverted the expression of the image. Sin prevents us from thinking clearly about God, about our relationship to Him, and about His will. It prevents us from thinking clearly about other people. Sin is so deceptive that not only are we guilty before God, but our sinfulness make us think that we're righteous! I would argue that the most important reason the Son came to earth and fulfilled the work of atonement is so that the image of God can be restored in us, believers. It's the grand purpose of redemption. I think that this is the core message of Paul's Letter to the Romans. It's in many other places in the N.T. as well (for example, 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:2; 1 Cor 13:12, and elsewhere).

In Romans, the Greek word for "glory" appears almost 30 times. Why? Because Paul's argument is that the goal of salvation is that we be transformed into the image of God in order to reflect His glory. Why does the Holy Spirit "groan" in Romans 8:26-29? It's for us to be totally and completely transformed into the likeness of Christ in the future, at our "glorification." God intends for us to share His glory, or participate in His glory, by being in the image and likeness of the Son. The present work of the Spirit in our lives anticipates proleptically our future state of perfect sanctification. God could forgive sinful Adam, and sinful Israel, and sinful David, and all the others because of the future work of Christ on the cross. Similarly, our being indwelt by the Spirit in this Church age is the future breaking into our present. What we should desire and strive for now, in this life, is being transformed into Christ's image because that's God's ultimate will for us. We're here to express God's beautiful and perfect character, His goodness, His glory in the world we inhabit. In Romans 9:23, Paul explicitly states that the purpose of election to salvation is our future glory. Our adoption as sons is because in Scripture, a son reflects the character of the father. Our union with Christ is partly so that Christ's character becomes ours. Christ restores in us what was perverted by the Fall, viz, God's glory. So we need to know what God's glory is, by knowing Scripture, and work at expressing it in the power of the Spirit.

Peter goes even further with this (although it's in Paul's writing as well). Union with Christ means we recapitulate (ie, repeat) Christ's life of suffering, death, resurrection and glorification in our lives. Peter envisioned all believers participating in the suffering of Christ, for that leads to glorification. See 1 Peter 2:21-25, 3:16-18, and 4:1. If we suffer because of our identity with Christ, we are repeating, or sharing in, or participating in the life of Christ, necessitated by our union with Him. Our destiny is to share in the glory of the Savior. Christ's perfect obedience, even to suffering the agonies of the cross, led to His glorification. Same with us. Our obedience – even if we suffer because of it – results in glory. Glory for us. And for God, whom we imitate.

I've recently been connecting dots and observing a pattern; a trajectory has already formed. Hatred of those who aren't "woke," of all those who are "conservative," of all who believe there was election fraud is now being openly expressed. There's always been a degree of contempt for such people, but it has just turned into unmitigated hatred. There are calls for all Trump supporters to be "deprogrammed." Exactly what that might include hasn't yet been described, but it may include an enforced abandoning of "superstitious religious ideas." Most Christians in our nation have been content to express their religion simply by attending services on Sunday mornings in the safety of their church buildings, and know nothing of identifying with Christ in the face of adversity. I suspect that the Church in America is about to experience something for which it is totally unprepared. If those in power in America turn up the heat on us who identify with Christ, we may have the opportunity to show love for God and obedience to His Word in a way that brings glory to God.

Finally, let's be like Moses in Exodus 32-33 and plead with God for our rebellious, idolatrous nation. And share the Gospel with them while we still can freely do that. May God's glory be on display by their salvation!