



## Exodus 33:18-23

### “Glory” (Part 1)

Moses’s request for God to unveil his glory is an audacious one. Either Moses is the greatest man of faith who has ever lived, or the greatest fool. “Glory” is a word we use often in modern English. For example, the American flag, nicknamed by Captain William Driver in 1824, is often called “Old Glory.” Some may have Morning Glory flowers growing at their house right now. Others talk about going out in a “blaze of glory” meaning a final triumph. This is not what the Bible means by the word (compare its usage in Isaiah 6:3; 1 Samuel 4:21; Job 19:9; Proverbs 16:31).

First, the **Exegesis** of the passage. There is more going on here than a mere request. He is seeking assurance from the Lord that his presence will remain with Israel (see verses 15-16). Moses understands that what sets Israel apart is not racial, ancestral, financial (they had been slaves), or even geographical (they had no land). It is relational. God dwells among his people. God has entered into a covenant with his people. Moses had already experienced some of God’s glory – the Burning Bush (Exodus 3), the cloud of glory (Exodus 24), and others. Despite this, Moses knows he has yet come close to exhausting God’s glory. He wants more. That is what makes this request so audacious. Moses sought a personal encounter with the God of glory. And at that moment, the best he could get was veiled by the shadow or a cleft rock. What was Moses hoping to see? We can’t know without exploring what the Bible means by “glory.”

Here, we must speak of the **Essence** of glory. Human language is inadequate for us to capture the essence of God. “Glory” might be as close as we can get. There are three ways “Glory” strikes at the essence of God. The first is *Heaviness*. The word for glory is often translated “weight” or “heavy.” The Priest Eli was elderly and “heavy” when he fell to his death (1 Samuel 4:18). Likewise, Absalom’s hair was long and “heavy.” In both instances, the writer used the same word translated “glory” in Exodus 33.

Other examples are helpful here. Pharaoh’s heart is “hardened” when confronted by Moses (Exodus 8:32). The word literally means “hard,” and is the same word translated “glory” elsewhere. Consider also Moses holding his arms up interceding on behalf of Israel while fighting the Amalekites. When his arms became wearisome (i.e., heavy), Aaron and Hur held his arms up (Exodus 17:12). Likewise, a person of extreme wealth is “heavy” in money & possessions. Abraham is said to be very “rich” (or “heavy”) in livestock, silver, and gold (Genesis 13:2).

Thus when we think of God’s glory, a helpful word, would be “splendor,” and “majesty.” It describes God’s overwhelming presence and essence. To stand in the presence of God is to be under the weight of that presence. What makes kings “heavy” is the splendor of his kingdom and his palace (see Matthew 4:8).

Glory also carries with it connotations of *Honor*. We often use “glory” in in this sense. A soldier may seek glory in battle as will an athlete or an actor seeking fame. This man-centered use of “glory” is found in the Bible. Joseph wanted his brothers to announce “all my honor in Egypt” to their father (Genesis 45:13). David died “at a good age, full of days, riches, and honor” (1 Chronicles 29:28). Throughout Scripture, God acts for the sake of his glory, honor, reputation, and praise.

In the Exodus story, God liberated the Hebrews for his glory. The plagues were directed at the weak gods of the Egyptians who worshiped the sun (so God turned it out) and the Nile River (so God turned it to blood). The point of the Exodus was not just to liberate the ancient Hebrews, but for the nations to know of God’s glory, honor, and praise. Isaiah makes this clear when he stated, “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isaiah 43:7). We, therefore, were not created because God was bored, but for his exclusive glory. Consider the “weight” that come with that. We exist, not for ourselves, but to bring glory, honor, and praise to the God of the universe. This is our purpose.

The final meaning of glory as it relates to the essence of God is *Brightness*. In Revelation, we discover the New Jerusalem will lack a sun and moon because “the glory of God gives it light” (Revelation 21:23, see also Ezekiel 1:28). By “bright” we don’t think of headlights on a rural street. We think of the noon sun coming out of a dark theater. God’s “glory” is overwhelming – brighter than the sun and beyond human imagination. God’s “essence” is so overwhelming, Moses is forced to hide in the shadow of a rock. Maybe another word is helpful here: beautiful (radiant beauty), majesty, or awe.

Moses made a request he could not, as a mere mortal, have fulfilled. We are different. Throughout Scripture, God’s glory is always veiled. At this moment on the mountain, Moses is forced to hide in the cleft of a rock (vs. 21-22). Earlier, Moses detailed the significance of the thick veil in the tabernacle designed to separated the divine from the human (Exodus 26:31). When Moses finally descended from the mountain, he wore a veil because his face reflected the glory of God (Exodus 34:33).

All of this changes at the coming of Christ. At the incarnation of God, God’s glory was manifested among his people. When his was laid in a manger, a group of shepherds watching their sheep at night witness the veil of creation withdrawn by an angelic choir who sang, “glory to the Lord in the highest!” (Luke 2:9). John lays the theological foundation of this truth when he states that “the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally, “tabernacled”) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Moses requested to see God’s glory and was hidden in the cleft of the rock, but, in Christ, God’s glory is manifested (see Hebrews 1:1-3a). No wonder the veil in the Temple was torn upon his death. If it is the glory of God we are seeking, we need not look farther than Christ who is, according to Paul, the clefted rock Moses hid in (1 Corinthians 10:4).