

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 18 OCTOBER 2020

No 31

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Wow. Today's passage from Exodus is an extraordinary insight into the mystery and character of God. It will remind us of the majesty, the uniqueness and the unfathomable might of God. It is both terrifying, and deeply comforting. While it will leave us appropriately mystified by God, it will also reassure us of God's providential care. When you feel ready to explore something of the wonders of the Lord Almighty, begin with these prayers.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

In today's passage, something of the wonder and mystery of God surround the exchange between God and Moses. That suggested a very popular hymn to me, which makes an excellent prayer of praise for God.

How Great Thou Art has a complicated history. In its first (Swedish) version, it was written as a poem by Rev Carl Boberg in 1886, whose inspiration was the beauty of the Swedish countryside and the majesty of the storms, sunshine and animal life which gave it its infinite wonder. Several years later, he was surprised to hear his poem being sung at a gathering he attended, to a traditional Swedish melody. The hymn was translated into German, English and Russian. However that English translation (by the American Rev Gustaf Johnson) is not what we sing today.

Our version was composed by the English Rev SK Hine who, in 1933, heard the hymn sung in Russian while he and his wife were working in the Ukraine. That experience came back to him when the couple was touring the beautiful Carpathian mountains, and he composed first two, then a third, verse in English. The fourth verse was composed after the War, completing the English version we have today. Even then, however, the hymn did not gain much traction until it was adopted and used in one of the Billy Graham crusades in Britain in 1954. Following that, it rapidly grew in popularity and is, today, found in countless hymnals in English-speaking countries.¹

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works they hand has made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander,
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze:

¹ Kenneth W Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories. The inspirational true stories behind 101 favorite hymns* (Grand Rapids, 2012), pp. 99f.

But when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die – I scarce can take it in
that on the cross, our burdens gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away our sin:

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home – what joy will fill my heart!
Then shall I bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim: My God, how great thou art!²

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

Lord our God,
We confess our utter unworthiness to you.
Our lives are full of stumblings and compromises
of which we are ashamed.
We confess before you and each other
that we have not loved you with our whole heart,
nor have we loved our neighbours as ourselves.
At moments like this, we make new resolutions,
yet in that same fleeting second,
we know that once again we shall fail.
Our sinful selves are too deep-rooted.
But Father you promise to accept us just as we are,
and, if we are truly sorry, to forgive our sins.
So we come to you again today,
to lay at your feet our sin and our stumbling,
our doubt and our fickleness,
and to ask for your forgiveness.
We repent of our sins and pray both for your mercy,
and for your strength to be more obedient in the days to come.

Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The wages of sin is death,
but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Whoever follows Jesus will have the light of life.
Be assured, this Jesus died that we might be forgiven our sins,
that we might live life to the full.
So in Jesus Christ, the risen one, be assured that our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Exodus 33:12-33

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 99

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

² Words from *Together in Song* (Melbourne, 1999), number 155.

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer**

In the days leading up to writing these notes, I've had a number of conversations with people from a variety of different congregations. It has brought home to me the deep poignancy of this moment in the life of the Church. So many congregations remain closed due to Covid, while some have reopened for worship that involves separation, mask-wearing and refraining from singing. As more congregations do feel confident to regather, albeit in this quite bizarre-feeling way, it is now clear that the Church can never be the same again, even if a vaccine is found and widely distributed. During the closures, people have discovered the wealth of on-line worship services available, and have been able to pick and choose, rather than simply go to their local congregation. That is bound to continue, but what does it mean for local congregations whose numbers could be dramatically diminished? At the same time I've had someone (who was an older person) from one congregation facing a vacancy say, "I don't know whom they'll call, but the place is run by older people who don't want to change." Someone else, in their 30s, said, "I went to Sunday School, I went to a church school, but I don't go to church anymore, because there's nothing for people my age." One congregation is adamant that they don't want sermons anymore, while someone else was saying to me how important the teaching and doctrine of a good sermon are to the life and spiritual health of the church. It would seem that Covid has underscored and exaggerated trends and changes that were already under way in the Church, and as we emerge from the pandemic, we shall quite literally be building a new Church, because the old one will have largely passed on. So this prayer is for the future of the Church.

God our Father,

We pray for the Church, in all its denominations and differences,
in this time of dramatic change.

The age profile of congregations grows older, and we are not connecting with younger people.

We honour and celebrate those whose faith has been firm throughout their life,
who have been and remain the heart and soul of our churches,

but we grieve for those who have found it difficult to find a place in our congregations.

Grant us the gifts to know how to make those connections,

and set us on fire with the passion to share the gospel of Jesus,

which knows no age boundaries, which is good news for everyone.

Help us to move on in our practices, our language and our music-making,

but anchor us firmly to the gospel and the truth of salvation in Jesus.

May we know when, and when not, to compromise in the things we hold dear,

what is ephemeral and cultural, and what is our foundation of faith.

Father, we pray for local congregations, particularly in rural areas,

where people have found alternatives to connecting with their local church.

We celebrate the fact that there can be very effective ministry exercised remotely,

for that has brought us through the times of lockdown and isolation,

but we also pray for the congregations whose very existence may be threatened

by an exodus of folk seeking to join on-line congregations instead.

On-line experiences build a very different kind of community from physical congregations.

We know that our faith grows in deep relationships,

and our outreach is primarily to our local communities,

so our prayer is not just for the sake of congregations' survival,

but that the life of faith in Jesus can continue to bear fruit, not just in the lives of individuals,

but in whole communities.

And yet, Father, we accept that there must be change, and we pray for ourselves,

that we may be part of the solutions, and not part of the problems,
that we shall be granted the wisdom to discern what is good, and Christ-serving,
from what may be destructive and ultimately harmful.

May we not be afraid of new technologies, or new gimmicks,
but equally not be so mesmerised by them that we lose our grip on reality.

May we recognise that choice between churches – physical or on-line –
can help to meet people’s deep needs,
but also be aware that “church-shopping” can ultimately be self-serving,
as people seek a church that will never challenge them or disagree with them,
or ask anything of them.

We pray for guidance and wisdom in these times of change,
and for the faith to know that you will never leave yourself without witnesses,
that the clarion call of the gospel cannot be silenced.

For these are difficult time, and the future is challenging indeed.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

Our father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come;

Your will be done

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil,

for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

now and forever.

Amen

8 **Conclusion**

These words from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, are a wonderful way to conclude.
I hasten to point out that the “me” is Paul speaking!

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is
anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have
learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
... BUT MY FACE SHALL NOT BE SEEN

Every generation wrestles with the reality of God. God comes to us in so many different ways. God's movement in the world so often does not conform with what we would, perhaps, have anticipated. God's justice and fairness are so different from human concepts of justice and fairness. God refuses always to be what we have decided he should be. And yet the reality of God's presence and involvement in his world is undeniable.

I remember a conversation I had some twenty years ago with a colleague. When I put to him the suggestion that God was far beyond our human ability to understand and must always be something of a mystery to us, he would have none of it. The Bible, he contended, told us all about God, and if we searched for its truths about God, then there was no mystery. Of course, I had to agree with that standpoint to a certain extent. In Jesus Christ, God revealed a great deal about his character. In Jesus, we have looked God in the face. But when we begin to think that we've got God nailed down, we have succumbed to our human arrogance. We've, wittingly or unwittingly, tried to limit God to someone that we can manage, and cope with, and ultimately control. But God is not like that. God cannot be limited to a set of rules. God is not amenable to description within the limitations of human languages. God's character is not completely knowable by us, who are after all no more than God's creation. God is far greater than we; there must always be a mystery about God; and that is why we come before God in worship and praise. You simply don't worship things that you can understand and control.

Our passage from Exodus today brings us face-to-face with these kinds of issues. It is surely one of the richest passages in all Scripture, and will reward a careful consideration. It is an account of an encounter between Moses and God, in the Tent of Meeting which had been pitched outside the Israelites' camp at Mount Sinai. While the people could only look on from outside, Moses would go right into the tent to meet with God. They spoke, the text tells us, "as one speaks to a friend" (33:11).

In the preceding verses, God has instructed Moses that it's time to leave Mount Sinai and to recommence the journey towards the land of promise. Our passage describes a very robust conversation which followed this instruction from God. Its robustness is brought out very well in the paraphrase *The Message*³, from which the following is taken:

Moses said to GOD, "Look, you tell me, 'Lead this people,'" but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, 'I know you well and you are special to me.' If I'm so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I'll continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is your people, your responsibility." (33:12-13)

Does Moses' directness surprise, even shock, us? It's not how most of us would think about addressing God, and even were we to contemplate it, few of us would dare to speak like that. What lies behind Moses' anger? We learn a few verses further on. Moses says to God (turning to the NRSV),

"If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? (33:15f)

Moses is insecure. A long and arduous journey lies ahead. He is the leader. He has already experienced the responsibilities of leadership when, when things seem to go wrong, the people turn on him and blame him for their hardships. God has come to his people's aid on a number of occasions, but still Moses is nervous, perhaps even frightened. He wants to be reassured that God

³ Eugene H Peterson, *The Message. The Bible in contemporary language* (Colorado Springs, 2002)

really will be with them for the long haul. It's a very human and very understandable anxiety!

Most of us are not called upon by God to undertake the kind of ministry asked of Moses, but nevertheless, we can all empathise with Moses in his concerns. We all long for that deep certainty and reassurance, that God truly is with us. The Old Testament often speaks as if God's presence among his people was far more tangible than is our own experience. In our passage today, Moses' meeting "face to face" (33:11) with God sounds like God came as a physical, visible presence into the Tent of Meeting with Moses. And yet Exodus itself tells us that that can only be a metaphor, for in verse 20 God warns Moses, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live". So Moses longs for a clear and unambiguous sign from God of God's good faith. Hence his aggressive approach to God. Most of us wouldn't dare speak to God in that way. We'd regard it as putting God to the test, which is forbidden (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7; Luke 4:12). And yet many would have felt just like Moses at some time in their walk with God.

What is remarkable about our passage is that God does not hold Moses' demands against him. God hears Moses' desperate plea, and God promises to reveal himself unmistakably to Moses.

The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'"

Surely here is a demonstration of God's mercy and love and grace. When we might expect God's justice to lead to Moses' punishment, instead God reaches out in generosity to meet Moses' very human need. God's words are more than reassuring; they are soothing and full of promise: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." The parallel with Jesus' words, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), is surely inescapable.

But there is much more that this passage has to offer. God reassures Moses, "You have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name." And when God passes before Moses, he utters the divine name, which is usually rendered "the LORD" in English translations. "The LORD", or sometimes "GOD", with capitalisation, designates the presence of the divine name YHWH (usually rendered "Yahweh") in the Hebrew text. So there is great significance in verse 19 quoted above. God knows Moses by name, and God reveals his name to Moses. Perhaps, as Christians who have been assured since we were children that God knows each of us personally, indeed that "even the hairs of [our] head are all counted" (Matthew 10:30), we miss just how remarkable this personal relationship between Moses and God is. Ancient gods simply did not enter into such relationships. They were to be feared, worshiped and appeased. They may choose to grant benefits or they may extract punishment, or they may simply be capricious. But they were not *friends*, and they most certainly didn't enter into intimate relationships with people. So the second thing to notice about our passage is the unique way in which God chose to relate to Moses and to his people. Again, we cannot help but be reminded of Jesus and the deep intimacy of his friendships. We cannot help but think of Jesus' encouragement that we should address God, the very creator of all that is, as "Father" (Matthew 6:9). Through Jesus Christ, we too have been granted the unheard-of privilege of intimacy with God!

But intimacy must not, and cannot be permitted to, breed familiarity. In our passage there are three distinct ways in which God resists Moses' demands. The mystery and awe of God are preserved. There are and must be, as we observed previously, things about God which we simply cannot know. We can only know what God chooses to reveal about himself.

One of Moses' demands of God is this:

Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight.

Moses is attempting to bargain with God. As *The Message* put it, "If I'm so special to you, let me know your plans." But God is silent on the subject. While God certainly promises to provide the reassurance which Moses craves, God does not undertake to reveal his plans, or his "ways". Moses will have to be content with God's assurances, for God will not succumb to Moses' attempt at manipulative arm-twisting. As mere mortals, we are incapable of knowing God's ways. The prophet Isaiah put it very clearly.

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the LORD.*

*"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

God simply does not accede to Moses' demand. God will reveal his plans in his own time, and to whom he chooses. Were Moses, or we for that matter, to know God's ways, we would come close to seeking to elevate ourselves to equality with God. There could be no greater sin. Moses, and we, must have the faith to know that, at the right time, God will reveal what of his plan he chooses.

The second way in which God resists Moses' demands concerns Moses' desire to know that Israel is special to God.

"For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." (emphasis added)

There is no doubt that God had called Israel. God had liberated Israel from bondage in Egypt. God had promised Israel a bountiful future. The promise of God's blessing continued. In Jeremiah, we find the famous undertaking, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (30:22, 32:38). But nothing in God's promises suggested that Israel was to be the *only* nation to receive God's blessings. Israel was commissioned by God to fulfil part of those purposes which God chose not to reveal in full. Israel's role was to provide a light to the nations, both itself as a nation (Isaiah 60:3), and as the nurturer of the divine servant who would *be* "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). God was certainly not going to accede to Moses' demand that Israel be designated as "distinct ... from every people on the face of the earth"!

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy," God remonstrates to Moses. God will provide the reassurance which Moses seeks, but God will stop short of providing the status to Israel of being his *only* people in all humanity. God is not in the business of national "exceptionalism". God's grace and mercy are for all, and God will not be manipulated otherwise. Here again we have a harbinger of the gospel of Jesus, which was for Jews and Gentiles alike, for God shows no favour to one people over another (Romans 3:29). It is one of the sadnesses of biblical history that, over time, the Israelites came to think of God as their exclusive property. God had made it very clear to Moses that he was not "owned" by any nation!

The final way in which God refuses Moses' demands is the most complex.

Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD' But," he said,

“you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

This scene is mysterious, even other-worldly. But if we look beyond the mechanics of it, it reveals a great deal about the mysterious nature of God. Moses demands to see God’s “glory”. Where this expression is used elsewhere in Exodus, it means the divine “aura”. So, for example, in 16:10, the Israelites “looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud”⁴. So what Moses is asking is to see, once again, that mysterious aura that gave reassurance that God was present. God promises to pass his “goodness” before Moses. The word translated “goodness” can equally mean “splendour”⁵. Perhaps that was all Moses was seeking, but God makes it very clear that there must be limits to his self-revelation. God’s splendour will pass before Moses, but he may not look upon it. God will shield him from its sight. It would seem that to see God’s splendour or God’s glory would be the same thing as to see God’s face, and to look upon God’s face would be fatal. “No one shall see me and live.” So Moses must be content with hearing God utter his name as he passes by, and then to see the aftermath of God’s passing. Moses’ demand. “Let me see your glory” is only to be met in hindsight.

Whatever this strange passage means, it is pregnant with implications. The splendour of God – God’s purity and utter goodness, God’s power and majesty, God’s omnipotence – are impossible for sinful humans to see. At such a sight, those afflicted by sin would simply shrivel and die, for sin cannot stand in the presence of God. But the fact that Moses, and the fact that we, may not actually catch sight of God in our world most certainly does not imply that God is not present. Moses will hear God utter the divine name; we shall hear the voice of God as he moves about in human affairs. Perhaps, like Moses, we crave for more than that. Perhaps the word of God is not enough for us to know for certain that God is present. But reassurance comes in the aftermath of God’s passing. We may see “God’s back”. How many times have we been, for whatever reason, unaware of the movement of God around us, and yet, looking back later, we can see the sure hand of God shaping the events that have passed, working towards a purpose which only becomes clear to us with hindsight? The glory of God has passed by, but we could not see it; the voice of God has sounded, but we could not hear it or were uncertain; but the purposes of God have been achieved and we know with utter certainty that God has been in our midst. Moses, and we, must be content with such signs of the presence of God. To demand more would be, arrogantly and dangerously, to demand that God reveal more of himself than he chooses to do.

And yet, in his mercy, God has in fact responded to Moses’ demand, and to our own craving, to know more of God’s character, even to see God. In the person of Jesus Christ, humanity could and can look upon the face of God. In Jesus is revealed the character of God. In Jesus, the resurrected one, is the ultimate assurance of God’s presence with us. Matthew’s gospel concludes with Jesus’ reassurance, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). In Jesus, all the characteristics of God which we’ve observed in our passage are exemplified: God’s personal relationship with each of us; God’s grace and mercy at our stumbling and doubt; God’s willingness to reach out to us to provide comfort and reassurance; but also God’s complete refusal to discriminate between peoples; and God’s reticence about revealing his “ways” and plans beyond what God chooses to reveal.

And, like the passing of the glory of God described in Exodus, where Moses was not permitted to

⁴ *The Harper Collins Study Bible including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical books* [NRSV] (London, 1989), notes on Exodus 33:18 and 16:6-7.

⁵ *Ibid* note on 33:19.

see God's aura until it had passed, but could know with confidence later that God had indeed been there, it was only in hindsight that the followers of Jesus came really to understand who Jesus is. It was the resurrection – surely “the glory of God” in the truest sense – which made it clear to the disciples that God himself had been among them. They came to see that God had chosen to show himself in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ God had chosen to reveal something of his character. Praise be to God. And yet the deep mystery of God remains – God's unfathomable love, God's merciful forgiveness, God's abundant grace. God is so unlike us that we could never understand him, and again, thanks be to God that he is *not* like us. What remains of that glorious encounter with God in Jesus Christ, its lasting aura, is the inexplicable, undeserved and loving salvation which God hold out to us, if only we open our eyes and grasp it.