

## **Asking for all of the Lord**

**by Scott Grant**

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### **The Lord is like lace**

Eugene Van Ness Goetchius begins his Greek text book with these words from Samuel Johnson: "Greek, Sir, is like lace; every man gets as much of it as he can." Presently, Goetchius writes, that remark makes little sense. "However, a little rummaging in the debris of history reveals that not so very long ago a knowledge of Greek, like a possession of an assortment of lace cuffs and jabots, was an indispensable mark of a gentleman." I'd like to suggest that the Lord is like lace; everyone gets, or should get, as much of him as he or she can.

In Exodus 33, Moses asks for as much of the Lord as he can get. This is particularly important for him as a leader. Ministry, and particularly leadership, begins with asking for as much intimacy with the Lord as we can get.

Israel's rebellion against the Lord in Exodus 32 has heightened Moses' role as a mediator. The focus in chapters 32 through 34 is Moses. Israel's fate now is even more intimately tied to Moses. How will Moses respond to the people's sin? How will Moses pray? How will the Lord respond to Moses? These are key questions that these chapters address.

The need for Moses' leadership is clearly seen in the first six verses of Exodus 33.

### **The need for a leader (33:1-6)**

Despite Israel's rebellion, the Lord announces his intention to continue blessing the people. He invokes his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give their descendants the land of Canaan. But things have changed. The Lord will send an angel to go before them, but he himself will not go with them.

Earlier, before the idolatry of the golden calf, the Lord promised to send an angel with them as well (23:23), but that was "my angel," not "an angel," and the reason for the presence of the angel this time is as a substitute for the Lord. If the Lord himself were to go with them, he would destroy them, just as he was going to "destroy" the inhabitants of the land (23:23). In this case, he loves them too much to go with them, for if he were to go with them, he'd have to destroy them, because they are "an obstinate people" that will not respond to him. So in not going with the people, the Lord is protecting them.

Nevertheless, this is an unhappy state of affairs. The Lord brought them out of Egypt to enter into a covenant relationship with him, and now that relationship is distant. The people have shown by their actions that they don't want the Lord.

The people respond to the Lord's words by mourning. In fact, the Lord told them to take off their ornaments, which is a sign of mourning, "that I may know what I will do with you." This is a curious statement. The Lord seems to be saying that he doesn't know what he will do with the people. It's almost as if he's waiting for all the evidence to come in before making the decision. This is a strange thing for the Lord, who is omniscient, to do. What more evidence does an all-knowing God need?

The Lord, once again, is inviting input. In 32:10 he told Moses, "Now then let me alone that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them." Why does the Lord need to ask anyone to leave him alone? He doesn't, of course. He was inviting Moses into the process.

This scene ends, strangely, with the people in mourning, symbolized with the stripping of their ornaments, and the Lord waiting to make a decision. He's waiting for something. Again, he's waiting for Moses. He wants to know how Moses, the mediator, the leader, will respond to this state of affairs. Once again, the Lord is inviting Moses' input.

The Lord has established the nation in such a way that it needs a leader, and that need, in this time of crisis, is even more intense. The Lord has established the church in such a way that it needs leaders. That is his way. The church needs people who will throw themselves into the arena. It needs people to take initiative. It needs people who will think and pray creatively and launch out into ministry, taking people with them, or going it alone if no one else will come. It needs people who will lead initiatives to reach the lost in our culture; it needs people who will lead initiatives to care for the poor; it needs people who will lead initiatives to care for those in the household of God; it needs people who will lead initiatives to develop community. More simply, it needs people who will invite people over to their homes. It needs people, more simply still, who will go to work each day, carrying Jesus with them. It needs people who have the courage to follow what God has placed on their hearts. Jesus, surveying the leaderless people of his day, lamented that they were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34).

But entering the arena, taking initiative and starting ministries is risky business. The pressure on someone who leads can be enormous, which is one reason why sheep lack shepherds, because shepherds can be crushed by the pressure placed on them by expectant sheep.

### **The pressure on a leader (33:7-11)**

The narrative reaches a peak in verse 6. The story has its readers nervously awaiting the Lord's decision regarding the people. What will he do with them? We all want to know. With every reader awaiting the answer, the narrator writes, "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp ... " We're waiting for the big decision, and the narrator starts telling us about Moses' camping trip! He might as well start telling us what Moses ate for dinner as well, and if we find out what he ate for breakfast, we can die happy!

What's the point of this little interlude? The point is to focus the narrative on Moses. The fate of the people is intimately tied to Moses. Therefore, the scene shifts to him.

Moses met with the Lord in something he called the "tent of meeting." Although elsewhere the tabernacle also is referred to as the tent of meeting, this tent is something different. The tabernacle hasn't even been set up yet, so clearly this is something different.

The tent of meeting was "outside the camp, a good distance from the camp." This speaks of Moses' separation from the people. He's the leader, and he alone meets with the Lord, and he has to get away from the people to do so. All of us, of course, need separation from people from time to time in order to seek the Lord.

When Moses went to the tent, the people would "gaze after" him. All eyes were on Moses. The people knew that Moses' interactions with the Lord were crucial. But think of the pressure on Moses. All eyes are on him. Everyone is looking expectantly to him. Even as he leaves the camp to meet with the Lord, the eyes of the people are on him. There's no escape.

Verses 9 and 10 once again highlight the uniqueness of Moses. When Moses entered the tent of meeting, the glory cloud, indicating the presence of the Lord, would join with him. When the people stood at the entrance of their tents, all they could do was look at the glory cloud as the Lord met with Moses. The Lord was not meeting with them. The Lord was standing at the entrance of the tent of meeting, but all that was standing at the entrance of the tents of the people was the people themselves.

When the people saw the cloud, indicating the Lord's meeting with Moses, they worshiped. Moses is their example. When he worships, they worship. Moses, the leader, is their example. This too places pressure on him. Not only can he not escape the gaze of the people, they are all following his lead. With so many people following him, he may be thinking, "I'd better not blow it."

Everything happens for the people at a distance, but the Lord speaks with Moses "face to face." This means simply that the Lord's communication with Moses was direct and didn't come to him in dreams and visions (Numbers 12:6-8). There is something different about this Moses. He's a leader. For the Israelites, he's *the* leader.

Not only are all the people looking to Moses, the Lord is as well -- in a different way of course. He's waiting for Moses to contribute to his decision. The destiny of the nation hinges on his response. What will the pressure do to him? What does the pressure do to us? How do we feel when all eyes are on us, when others are depending on us, when the lives of others, seemingly, are in our hands? The pressure has the potential to crush us, and the pressure often persuades us never to place ourselves in situations where others are depending on us.

Earlier this year, Commander Donnie Cochran resigned as flight leader of the Blue Angels, the Navy's acrobatic jet team. "I'm looking primarily at myself," Cochran said. "I needed to take some action to preclude some type of mishap from occurring." In evaluating Cochran's decision, a former flight leader said, "The pressure to perform to a very, very high standard is excruciating. There's no room for any error. Perfection is what you're always going for, but the hell of it is, you never get there. You never, never have a perfect flight. It may look perfect from the ground, but it certainly isn't ever. But we demand that you continue to strive for that." Team spokesman Lt. John Kirby said Cochran's decision was based on the fear that "he might impair the viability of the team and, of course, safety, which is our chief concern." The pressure, when people are depending on us, can be intense.

What does Moses do? He prays.

### **The prayer of a leader (33:12-17)**

Moses' prayer is based on God's word. Moses first of all tells the Lord what the Lord told him. The Lord has instructed him to "bring up," or lead, the people -- a daunting task. But the Lord has also told Moses that "I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight." Moses, taking note of the task the Lord has given him, second of all takes note of the Lord's disposition toward him. The Lord knows him by name -- knows him intimately. And Moses has found favor, or grace, in the Lord's sight. These two facts, taken together, are phenomenal, really. Moses is both known by the Lord intimately and favored by him. One might think that the Lord's intimate knowledge of Moses, or any of us, with all the crud that we run through our brains, would cause the Lord to destroy Moses, not favor him. Yet the Lord still favors him.

The Lord knows us intimately as well. His eyes see everything. Perhaps there is no way we think that we could find favor in his eyes. Galatians 3:26-27: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." God favors his sons, who we have become through faith in Christ. His sons are clothed with Christ. How can God not favor someone who is clothed with his Son? The Lord both knows us intimately and favors us highly. He approves of us.

On the one hand, Moses' task is daunting; on the other hand, the Lord favors him. The task the Lord gives us may be daunting as well. But we need to know that he favors us. This gives us the freedom to move into pressure-packed situations, confident that though no one else may favor us, the Lord does.

Moses has heard the word of the Lord, and he does something we may not be as inclined to do: He believes it. He takes the Lord seriously. He believes that the Lord knows him intimately and favors him highly. As such, he knows he has the freedom to respond to such favor and boldly pray to God. A child who knows he is loved by his father will be much freer, much bolder, with his father than a child who feels unloved.

Given the daunting task and believing in the Lord's favor, Moses prays. Before considering his prayer, consider how else Moses could have prayed. If we had been given the task of leading the people, how might we have prayed? Moses could have prayed that the Lord straighten out the rebellious people. He could have prayed that the Lord would destroy the people's enemies. He could have prayed for success. He could have prayed that he would be effective as a leader. He could have prayed for personal strength. Yet he prays for none of these things.

Instead, he prays, " ... let me know your ways, that I may know you, so that I may find favor in your sight." It seems strange that Moses would pray to find favor in the Lord's sight when he has already recognized that he has found favor. It would seem that this part of the prayer is simply that it would be confirmed that he has found favor. A positive answer to the first part of the prayer would confirm for Moses that he has found favor. Moses asks that he may know the ways of the Lord, but this is only that he might know the Lord. Moses looks at the ways of the Lord simply as a vehicle to know the Lord. So what is Moses praying for? He's praying for intimacy with the Lord. As the Lord has known Moses, Moses wants to know the Lord.

Of all the things that Moses could have prayed for, why does he pray for intimacy with the Lord? This is the key to leadership, ministry, and all of life, for that matter: relationship with the Lord. Why is relationship with the Lord so important? Because it enables us to face up to the pressure. The pressure creates fear of failure, fear of failing people, perhaps hundreds of people. But intimacy with the Lord teaches us that failure, amazingly enough, doesn't matter. If we know the Lord intimately, we know of his goodness, his faithfulness, his sovereignty -- his ability to turn failures into victories. Growing intimacy with the Lord, then, is the one thing we need most as we move forward into the tasks he's given us.

The Lord said he would send an angel. With the angel, the people would be effective -- the inhabitants of the land would be defeated (33:2). Moses wants more than an angel. He wants more than effectiveness. He wants the Lord! And he recognizes the presence of the Lord as the one thing that distinguishes both him and the rest of the Israelites. The Lord is all that makes them different. The presence of the Lord is all that makes us different, and that difference is intended by the Lord to be noticed by "all the other people who are upon the face of the earth" so that they, too, might follow the Lord.

The Lord grants Moses' request for intimacy: "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest," and again, "I will also do this thing which you have spoken; for you have found favor in my sight, and I have known you by name."

The Lord has put things on our hearts. There are things we are drawn to, ministries he's prepared us for, tasks he's given us. They may be daunting. We can run from the pressure, or we can believe God's word. We can believe that he knows us intimately and favors us highly. We can take him seriously and move forward, boldly praying that the Lord would enable us to draw closer to him.

William Still, a longtime pastor in Scotland, was addressing other pastors with these words that are applicable to all who would lead and all who would serve: "My whole concern in my work of trying make pastors (and I have 'made' too few, although I have had many men come through my hands), is that they become men of God; then, the pastoral work will look after itself. It will still have to be done. But the man of God is made for that." He talks about the "basics of a ministry with transforms the character of all sorts of people." The first "basic" is this: "First, the pastor must know Christ, really know him, and live his life as sifted by his all-searching holiness all the time. This is the only way to produce any fruit, not to say any satisfaction, not to say any fun in his life." In Still's words to leaders, we hear Moses' words to the Lord: "let me know your ways that I may know you."

You'd think that Moses, after receiving such a positive response from the Lord to his request for intimacy, would be satisfied and return to lead the people. But he doesn't. He wants more.

### **The greediness of a leader (33:18-23)**

Moses asks the Lord to "show me your glory." What Moses evidently has in mind is a full-blown exposure to all of who the Lord is. He's seen the glory cloud, and he even walked into the middle of the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai (24:18). Moses has known the Lord; the Lord grants his request for further knowledge; now Moses seeks further knowledge, perhaps ultimate knowledge. Moses is saying, "Lord, I want all of you."

Moses is greedy. When it comes to relationship with the Lord, greed is a good thing. The Lord is like lace. Each of us should get as much of him as we can. Intimacy with the Lord breeds the desire for more intimacy with the Lord. To him who has shall more be given.

The words "glory," "goodness" and "face" are used interchangeably here. The Lord's glory is the Lord's goodness is the Lord's face. Glory speaks of revelation, and face speaks of expression. It's good to know that when the Lord is glorified, that when he expresses himself, he reveals and expresses "goodness." This is clear in the Lord's intention to be "gracious" and to "show compassion." The English wording makes such grace and compassion sound somewhat capricious, as if the Lord is gracious to whomever he feels like whenever he feels like it. But The Lord is telling Moses that he will be gracious and compassionate to him and to Israel.

What is the Lord's response to Moses' request? "You cannot see my face, for no man can see me and live!" A full-force exposure to all of the Lord is evidently more than Moses, or any person, can handle. It's as if his glory, his goodness, his face, is too magnificent to behold.

The Lord instructs Moses to stand on the rock and behold the Lord's "back," not his face. Earlier the people were "standing" to look at Moses (33:8); now Moses is to "stand" to look at the Lord. The people look to Moses, the leader. Moses flourishes as a leader, and is able to stand up under the people's expectant gaze, only as he looks to the Lord. The same is true for us, of course.

Moses asks for more of the Lord, and the Lord gives him more, but not all. The Lord passes by Moses, but the Lord protects him until his glory passes by; then Moses may look. Moses gets close -- really close -- to the Lord, but even Moses the servant of the Lord can't get too close. The glory of the Lord is simply too much.

## **The glory of Christ**

Moses realizes that to lead, to serve, to minister, the most important qualification is relationship with the Lord. So he asks to know the Lord, and the Lord grants his request. Ultimate knowledge is graciously denied, but Moses returns to the people and leads them. Secure in who the Lord is and who he is in relationship to the Lord, he faces up to the pressure.

How about us? If our leadership and ministries and lives are dependent on intimacy with the Lord, can we get as close to the Lord as Moses got? The earth-shaking truth of the New Testament is that we can get closer! Moses couldn't see all of God because he couldn't see Jesus Christ. God's fullest revelation of himself came in his Word, Jesus (John 1:1). Until the appearance of Christ, until his death, until his resurrection, God's expression of himself was limited. Moses would not have been able to handle the full-force expression of the presence of the Lord; apart from understanding God's expression of himself in Jesus, the unbelievable love that he poured forth, it would have been utter nonsense.

We, however, have seen Jesus. We have seen God's fullest expression. As John says, "we beheld his glory" (John 1:14). And now evident is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Moses could not see the glory of the Lord or the face of the Lord. He was limited in his relationship with God. We are not. Christ has come. The Lord does not have to hide us in the cleft of a rock and cover us with his hand as he passes by. His glory -- all of it -- is evident in Jesus Christ. And he invites us to take in his glory, to bathe in it, to absorb all of who he is.

So if Moses could face up to the pressure of leading the nation because he knew the Lord, albeit partially, can we face up to the pressure of ministry, leadership and life because we know the Lord, and can know him more fully? The task may be daunting. The prospects for failure may be overwhelming. The pressure may be excruciating. But the Lord is there to be known. All of him. Ask to know him, and to know him well. Ministry, and particularly leadership, begins with asking for as much of the Lord as we can get.