

Exodus Chapters 33-34 - John Karmelich

For these chapters, I believe God wants me to discuss, "What does it mean to take God with us?" Keep that in mind while I explain these chapters: They start with the Israelites finally leaving the spot where Mt. Sinai is located, where the 10 Commandments were given and the "how build the tabernacle thing" occurred. They are now about to begin their journey to the Promised Land (i.e., Israel). It brings us to the issue of will God go with them? Of course, most of us believe He's everywhere! Most of us desire God guidance as we go through our lives! Obviously we can't think about God 24/7. Part of my prayer ritual in the morning is to ask for His guidance (and I hope it is for each of us). If we accept that God's guiding us, how does that work? These chapters discuss this topic as the stories here tie to the question of "God going with us" versus God saying in effect, "You're on your own, good luck with your life!"

Before I get into the text itself, let me tackle the question of God being "with us". The question is after we dedicate our lives to serving Him, does God always guide our lives or only if we're good (whatever that means)? Remember God's a "gentlemen" meaning that He'll only guide our lives if we ask Him to! The next issue is once we ask Him to guide our life, He does He expect obedience? Yes, but He doesn't expect perfection as well, that's impossible. It does mean we care about our relationship with Him and desire that He guide us for His glory. My view about God is the only thing He's required to do is keep His word that I'm saved no matter how bad I mess up as I'm trusting Jesus is God, and in charge of my life then the rest is just being a witness for Him. To be a good witness I pray for His guidance. That's out of my system so now I can explain these chapters further:

Chapter 33 opens with God telling Moses in effect, "We're done with the 10 Commandments and how to build Me a tabernacle, so it's time for you (Moses) to lead your people to Israel. It's what I promised your ancestors (that their descendants could have it)". In the text it appears God is still ticked off about the golden calf thing (the previous chapter where the Israelites built a big idol (a golden calf) as Moses was talking to God). Moses correctly believed God was telling him in effect, "Good luck getting there as I'm still pretty ticked off about the golden calf thing!" (Obviously God did this to test Moses!) The Israelites knew they messed up.

Meanwhile it was time for Moses to talk to God more about the situation. The text mentions that all of the Israelites watched Moses travel to a tent he set up (not the tabernacle) to talk to God. There was not a lot to do there. The cloud that followed the Israelites somehow centered over this tent as Moses went there to talk to God. Again this was a big deal as the issue was God going with them as opposed to say "a low level angel capable of mistakes" leading their way to the Promised Land.

Bottom line, Moses gives God a "sales pitch" for the Israelites. In effect Moses said, "We won't move an inch unless You come with us." Moses reminds God that His reputation is on the line. It is the idea that we know we are imperfect but we ask God to go with us and guide us because He loves us and not because we're perfect people! Moses even says "How will the world know we are Yours if You do not lead us yourself?" That's what's behind the idea of asking God to guide us even though we're saved but we still want Him to lead our lives for His glory!

At this point Moses wants a sign. It's the idea that if God is going to lead them how will they know? It is then where God says "My goodness will pass before you". Obviously we don't get that type of visual from God. In effect we get something better, the written word to guide us as to how we should live! It wasn't available yet in Moses day, so he got a "show" of God revealing Himself to Him. We don't get much of a description of what Moses saw only that it was God's "backside". I believe since He's God,

He can visualize Himself anyway He wanted to. What I suspect backside means is the best way for us to see how God has worked is by what He's done in the past. That's my speculation, as to what Moses did see that's referred to as God's "backside" but the reality is no one but Moses knew what he saw.

In Chapter 34 God says in effect, "If I'm going with you, then you have to go on My terms!" Obviously it means to live by His rules! Bottom line, there's a 40 day delay as Moses had to go alone back up Mt. Sinai to get another copy of the 10 Commandments since He broke the last set! By God giving Moses another copy it's a reminder that if we break His laws, they're still in play! So why another 40 days? I believe it's because the number 40 is associated with "trials". With Noah it rained for 40 days. With the Israelites they had to wander in the desert for 40 years as two prime examples! That doesn't mean when we mess up, it's 40 days of punishment! Just saying in the bible, "40" is associated with trials. Accept it and move on.

Obviously it didn't take God 40 more days to dictate the commandments again on two stone tablets. I'd argue the main purpose of this time is to remind Moses to tell the Israelites what's His requirements for them as they go through life. Therefore God goes over the Jewish holidays. He specifically names the commandments they broke to make the golden calf (a subtle hint!). God also says that when they get to Israel they aren't to worship the local gods or intermarry with the locals. We need to grasp just how bad the "gods" were in Israel back then. They sacrificed live children to them! Male and female prostitutes were there to "stimulate" the gods. Remember the Israelites came out of slavery. When they see all of the financial success in the land of Israel and the temptation to live like the locals was high, these laws are there to remind them who to trust! (Just as sin is always enticing before the sting of it hits later!)

We get the reminder of working six days and taking one day off to focus on God. Remember that all of these laws and holidays were to help the Israelites keep their focus on God. I'd argue one reason why it is a good idea of daily bible reading and church service is again to keep our focus upon Him as we tend to wander easily from how God desires we live! We're back to the idea of God being with us if we are willing to live by His rules. For Christians the New Testament talks about which laws are appropriate for us. The general idea is to live as God desires so we can be a good witness for Him!

The laws we get are a mixture of things that only apply to the Jewish nation as well as one's Christians are supposed to follow. The Jewish holidays are well, "Jewish things". They point to what Jesus did for us. Not mixing with nonbelievers in marriage and business is something Paul taught in 1st Corinthians. Bottom line, the issue is about separating ourselves as a witness for God. This part of Chapter 34 ends by stating that Moses was there 40 days to get all these instructions. The good news is the Israelites did not build any more idols during that 40-day time Moses was away!

The last few verses talks about Moses face after talking to God. Apparently his face glowed then so he wanted to wear a veil after meeting God so people wouldn't be intimidated by that look! Paul commented on this as he said the people couldn't see the glory of God fading after Moses was done talking to Him. (That's the reference to 2nd Corinthians 3:13.) How Moses literally looked, we don't know. All we do know is he looked like someone who just spent time in God's presence and needed to veil it as it faded away. Why would Moses want to veil that look? I suspect so people would focus on God's words and not the affect of being in His presence.

Bottom line, we get two chapters dealing with God traveling with us and what we should and shouldn't do to get God to go with us. The short version is to pray for His guidance, live by His rules as we make the best decisions we can as we go through our day knowing He is guiding us, even when we mess up!

If interested, there are two other links on this chapter. They are for a more detailed lesson that I wrote about 20 years ago. Of course, you're welcome to read that if you'd like. Either way, I'm grateful that you did read this! If you're new here, realize you're always welcome to e-mail me. Thanks again, John