

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: God's Presence and Glory; the Covenant Renewed

Exodus 33:1–34:35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these two chapters bring the golden-calf crisis to its resolution and reveal the very heart of God. What is at stake first is the presence of God: after Israel's grievous sin, the threat is not the loss of the land but the loss of God Himself going with them. The student must feel that a relationship with God, not merely His gifts, is the treasure. Moses' intercession (33:12–18) models a faith that will not be satisfied with anything less than the living God, and his plea, 'Show me your glory,' voices the deepest hunger of the human heart.

The doctrinal high point is God's self-revelation in 34:6–7, the most quoted description of God's character in all of Scripture. Here God holds together what we are forever tempted to tear apart: He is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving sin, and yet He will by no means clear the guilty. Mercy does not cancel justice; justice does not cancel mercy. Teach the student to refuse every cheap resolution, the sentimental god who excuses sin and the harsh god who knows no grace. The only place these two are perfectly reconciled is the cross, where God is shown to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25–26). Present the covenant renewal as a real, historical restoration of the Old Covenant by grace, a covenant ultimately surpassed by the New Covenant in Christ.

The formation aim is that the student would prize God's presence above His provision, would hunger to know God as He truly is, and would worship the God who is both holy and gracious. Moses' shining face (34:29–35), which Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 3 to contrast the fading glory of the old covenant with the surpassing, lasting glory of the new, should leave the student longing not for a veiled and fading glory but for the unveiled and abiding glory of Christ. Aim the heart at seeking the face of God in Jesus, and at being transformed from glory to glory into His likeness.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 33:1–6. God promised to give the land but said He would not go up among the people, lest He consume them. What does this sober word reveal about the holiness of God and the seriousness of the sin Israel had just committed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 33 opens with God commanding Moses to lead the people up to the promised land, reaffirming the oath sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (33:1). God will send an angel and drive

out the nations (33:2). But then comes the devastating qualification: 'I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people' (33:3).

This is the gravity of the golden calf coming home. The sin was not a minor lapse; it was covenant-breaking idolatry at the foot of the mountain where God had just spoken. God's holiness is such that His unmediated presence among an unrepentant, stiff-necked people would be lethal to them, not because God is cruel, but because sin cannot dwell with holiness and survive.

Notice the painful logic: the gift remains (the land), but the Giver threatens to withdraw (His presence). God will keep His promise without breaking His holiness. This sets up the central tension of the chapter, and the central question of the whole study: will God go with His people?

Teach that this word reveals both the seriousness of sin and the costliness of God's presence. We should never treat God's nearness casually. That a holy God would dwell among sinners at all is a wonder that should humble us, and it presses toward the question of how such a thing can be made possible.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel's golden-calf sin was covenant-breaking idolatry, not a minor lapse.
- God's holiness is such that His presence among unrepentant sinners would consume them.
- God will keep His promise (the land) without compromising His holiness.
- The threat is the loss of God's presence, the heart of the relationship.
- Sin is serious, and God's nearness is never to be treated casually.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was God's word in 33:3 so devastating to Israel?
- What does this reveal about the seriousness of sin?
- Why is it a wonder that a holy God dwells with sinners at all?

Question 2

Student Question:

Read 33:4–6. When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned and stripped off their ornaments. When God shows you the weight of your sin, do you respond with genuine sorrow and humbling, or do you rush past it? What would honest mourning over sin look like for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When the people heard this 'disastrous word,' they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments (33:4). God repeated the call, and the people stripped off their ornaments from Mount Horeb

onward (33:5–6). This is genuine grief, an outward sign of inward sorrow over what their sin had cost them.

This is a portrait of right response to the revelation of sin's weight. The people do not argue, excuse, or rush past the moment. They mourn. They humble themselves. The ornaments, which may have been associated with the very gold given to the calf, are laid aside as a sign of repentance.

Apply this honestly to the student. When God shows us the true weight of our sin, the temptation is to minimize it, to move quickly to reassurance, or to grow defensive. But godly sorrow has its place. It is not morbid self-hatred; it is the honest grief of a heart that sees what it has done and longs to be restored.

Be careful to hold this with grace. The mourning is not the end; it leads toward renewal. But the renewal in chapter 34 means more precisely because the people first felt the weight of what they had done. Press the student: do you let God's word do its convicting work, or do you hurry past it?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The people responded to God's word with genuine mourning and humbling.
- Laying aside the ornaments was an outward sign of inward repentance.
- Godly sorrow over sin is right, not morbid (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- We are tempted to minimize or rush past the weight of our sin.
- Honest grief over sin prepares the heart for restoration.

Discussion Prompts

- How did the people respond when they saw the cost of their sin?
- What is the difference between godly sorrow and morbid self-hatred?
- Where are you tempted to rush past conviction rather than feel it?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 33:7–11. Moses met with God at the tent, and the LORD spoke with him 'face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.' What does this nearness reveal about the kind of relationship God desires to have with His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 7–11 describe the tent of meeting that Moses pitched outside the camp, where anyone who sought the LORD would go. When Moses entered, the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door, and the LORD spoke with Moses 'face to face, as a man speaks to his friend' (33:11). The people watched and worshiped at their own tent doors.

The phrase 'face to face' is a metaphor for the directness and intimacy of the communication, not a contradiction of 33:20, where God says no one may see His face and live. It describes a relationship of unusual nearness and openness, the kind God grants to Moses as His servant and friend.

This nearness reveals God's heart. He is not a distant deity content with ceremony at arm's length. He desires to speak with His people, to be sought, to be known. Even amid the crisis of sin, there is a tent where one may seek the LORD, and a servant with whom God speaks as a friend.

Teach that God still desires this kind of relationship with His people, now opened to all believers through Christ. We are called friends of God (John 15:14-15), invited to draw near (Hebrews 4:16; James 4:8). The intimacy Moses tasted points to the fellowship God offers all who come to Him through His Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses met God at the tent, and the LORD spoke with him as a friend.
- 'Face to face' describes intimacy of communication, not a literal sight of God.
- God desires nearness and fellowship, not distant ceremony.
- Even amid crisis, there was a place to seek the LORD.
- This intimacy points to the friendship God offers through Christ (John 15:15).

Discussion Prompts

- What does 'face to face' reveal about Moses' relationship with God?
- How does this show God's desire for nearness with His people?
- How is this fellowship opened to us in Christ?

Question 4

Student Question:

Read 33:12-16. Moses refused to go forward without God's presence, saying, 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.' Where are you tempted to march ahead with your plans, your work, or your life without first seeking the presence of God? What would it look like to refuse to go without Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question carries Moses' resolve into the student's life. Moses, given the promise of the land and an angel, refuses to budge without God Himself: 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here' (33:15). He would rather stay in the wilderness with God than enter the land without Him.

This is the heart of true faith and worship. Moses had learned to value God above God's gifts. He understood that what set Israel apart from every other nation was not the land, the law, or the blessings, but the presence of God among them (33:16). Take away that presence, and nothing else matters.

Apply this to the student's daily life. We so easily charge ahead with our plans, careers, families, and even our ministry, assuming God's blessing without ever truly seeking His presence. We want His help with our agenda more than we want Him. Moses reverses this: God first, then the path forward.

Press for concreteness. Where specifically is the student moving forward without seeking God, in a decision, a relationship, a use of time? What would it look like this week to refuse to go without Him, to seek His presence in prayer and submission before acting?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses refused to go forward without God's presence (33:15).
- He valued God Himself above the land and every other gift.
- What set Israel apart was God's presence among them (33:16).
- We are tempted to pursue our plans without truly seeking God.
- True faith seeks God's presence first, then the path forward.

Discussion Prompts

- Why would Moses rather stay in the wilderness with God than enter the land without Him?
- Where are you charging ahead without seeking God's presence?
- What would refusing to go without Him look like this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 33:17–23. Moses asked, 'Please show me your glory,' and God answered by proclaiming His goodness and name, while hiding Moses in the cleft of the rock. What does this reveal about God's glory, and about how a holy God graciously makes Himself known to sinful people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Emboldened by God's favor, Moses makes his greatest request: 'Please show me your glory' (33:18). God answers by promising to make all His goodness pass before Moses and to proclaim His name, 'The LORD' (33:19). Yet God also sets a limit: 'You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live' (33:20). So God places Moses in a cleft of the rock, covers him with His hand, and lets him see only His 'back' as His glory passes by (33:21–23).

This passage reveals the nature of God's glory and the way a holy God graciously makes Himself known. God's glory is bound up with His goodness and His name, His revealed character. Moses

asks to see glory; God answers by proclaiming character. The fullest revelation of God's glory is not blinding light but the declaration of who He is.

The cleft of the rock and the covering hand show grace and protection together. Sinful man cannot bear the full, unveiled glory of God; it would consume him. So God shelters Moses, revealing as much as a creature can bear. The God who longs to be known also protects the one who seeks Him.

Teach that God still makes Himself known graciously and on His terms. The fullness of His glory we now behold not in a cleft of rock but in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6), 'the radiance of the glory of God' (Hebrews 1:3). What Moses glimpsed in shadow, we behold in the Son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses asked to see God's glory; God answered by proclaiming His goodness and name.
- God's glory is revealed chiefly in His character, not mere brightness.
- Sinful man cannot bear God's unveiled glory and live (33:20).
- The cleft of the rock shows God's grace and protection together.
- God's full glory is now seen in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Discussion Prompts

- How does God answer Moses' request to see His glory?
- What does it mean that God's glory is revealed in His character?
- How do we now behold God's glory in Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

Read 33:18–19. Moses' deepest longing was not for a sign but for God Himself: 'Show me your glory.' How hungry are you to know God as He really is? What in your life crowds out that longing, and how might you cultivate it this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses Moses' longing into the student's heart. Moses' deepest desire was not for a miracle, a victory, or a blessing, but for God Himself: 'Show me your glory' (33:18). His hunger was to know God more fully, to see Him as He is.

This exposes the true measure of our spiritual health. Many of us pray chiefly for things, for help, for relief, for outcomes. How often do we pray simply to know God better, to see His glory, to be drawn nearer to His heart? Moses' prayer is a mirror.

Examine what dulls that hunger. Busyness, distraction, contentment with God's gifts rather than God Himself, a prayer life reduced to requests, a heart too full of lesser things. The longing to know God can be cultivated or it can be slowly starved.

Call the student to cultivate this hunger deliberately, through Scripture (where God reveals Himself), through prayer that seeks His face and not just His hand, and through worship. The promise stands: those who seek God find Him (Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 5:8). Name one way to feed that hunger this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses' deepest longing was for God Himself, not merely His gifts.
- Our prayers often seek things from God more than God Himself.
- Busyness, distraction, and lesser things can starve the hunger to know God.
- The longing to know God can be cultivated through Word, prayer, and worship.
- Those who seek God with the whole heart find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).

Discussion Prompts

- How hungry are you to know God Himself, not just His gifts?
- What in your life crowds out the longing to know Him?
- What is one way you could feed that hunger this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 34:1–9. God commanded new tablets to be cut and descended in the cloud to renew the covenant Israel had broken. What does this renewal reveal about the patience and grace of God toward a people who had so recently betrayed Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 34 opens with God commanding Moses to cut two new tablets of stone like the first, which Moses had broken, and to come up the mountain again (34:1–3). God will write again the words that were on the first tablets. The covenant Israel shattered is being renewed by God's initiative and grace.

This is a stunning display of God's patience. The people had broken the covenant in the most flagrant way, with idolatry at the very foot of the mountain. By every right, God could have abandoned them. Instead, He calls Moses back up, provides new tablets, and restores the relationship. Grace, not Israel's merit, drives the renewal.

The new tablets, cut by Moses but inscribed by God, picture a relationship mended by divine grace working through human response. Moses must cut the stones and climb the mountain, but only God can write the words and renew the covenant. The initiative is God's throughout.

Teach that this renewal is a real, historical restoration of the Old Covenant, and that it points beyond itself. The same gracious God who renewed a broken covenant with Israel has now established a New Covenant in Christ, written not on stone but on hearts (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:6–13), a covenant that cannot be broken because it rests on the finished work of the Son. God’s patience with Israel is a preview of His grace toward us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God commanded new tablets and renewed the covenant Israel had broken.
- The renewal flows from God’s grace and initiative, not Israel’s merit.
- God’s patience with covenant-breakers is astonishing.
- The renewal is a real, historical restoration of the Old Covenant.
- It points forward to the unbreakable New Covenant in Christ (Hebrews 8:6–13).

Discussion Prompts

- What does the covenant renewal reveal about God’s patience?
- Whose initiative drives the renewal, and how do you know?
- How does this point forward to the New Covenant in Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

Read 34:8–9. When Moses heard God proclaim His name, he quickly bowed his head and worshiped, pleading for God to pardon and go with them. When you glimpse God’s mercy and majesty together, does it drive you to worship and to ask for His presence? What stirs worship in your heart, and what dulls it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question draws from Moses’ response in 34:8–9. The moment God proclaimed His name, Moses ‘quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped,’ then pleaded, ‘O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us... and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.’ Revelation of God’s character produced immediate worship and renewed petition for His presence.

Worship is the fitting response to seeing God as He is. Moses did not analyze the proclamation; he fell on his face. When the holiness and mercy of God meet in our sight, the natural response of a humbled heart is reverence and adoration.

Notice too what Moses asks for: God’s presence, pardon, and to be God’s own possession. Having glimpsed God’s mercy and majesty, he wants more of God, not less. The vision of God’s character makes him bolder in prayer, not more distant.

Apply this to the student. What stirs your worship? And what dulls it? When you glimpse God's mercy and majesty in Scripture or in your life, does it bow your heart and draw out prayer, or do you remain unmoved? Examine what has deadened your sense of wonder, and ask God to restore it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses responded to God's self-revelation with immediate worship (34:8).
- Seeing God as He is rightly produces reverence and adoration.
- The vision of God's mercy made Moses bolder in prayer, not more distant.
- Moses asked for God's presence, pardon, and to belong to Him (34:9).
- Familiarity, distraction, and sin can dull our sense of wonder before God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did Moses bow and worship at hearing God's name?
- How does glimpsing God's mercy and majesty make you bolder in prayer?
- What stirs your worship, and what dulls it?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 34:6–7. God proclaimed His own name: 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.' How does this revelation hold together God's mercy and His justice, and how are both fully satisfied at the cross of Christ (Romans 3:25–26)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block. As His glory passes by, the LORD proclaims His own name: 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation' (34:6–7). This is the most quoted self-description of God in the Bible, echoed again and again by later writers.

The first half overflows with mercy: God is merciful, gracious, patient, abounding in steadfast love (hesed) and faithfulness, forgiving every kind of wrong. This is grace upon grace, the very heart of God toward sinners. After the golden calf, these words are unspeakably good news.

But the proclamation does not stop there. The same God 'will by no means clear the guilty.' His justice is as real as His mercy. He does not wink at sin or pretend it does not matter. Sin has consequences that ripple outward (the reference to the fathers and children describes the real

social and generational effects of sin within the covenant community, not the punishing of the innocent for another's guilt, which Scripture elsewhere denies, Ezekiel 18:20; Deuteronomy 24:16). The crucial point is that God holds mercy and justice together. He forgives, and yet He will by no means clear the guilty.

This is the great tension of the verse, and we must not resolve it cheaply. We are forever tempted toward one of two false gods: a sentimental god who is all mercy and excuses sin, or a harsh god who is all justice and knows no grace. The real God is both, fully and at once. How can He forgive sin and yet by no means clear the guilty? In the Old Testament, the question hangs in the air, answered only in shadows through the sacrificial system.

The full answer is the cross. Romans 3:25–26 says God put forward Christ as a propitiation, to be received by faith, 'to show God's righteousness... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' At Calvary, God did not set aside His justice to show mercy, nor His mercy to satisfy justice. He poured out the full penalty of sin upon His Son, so that He could forgive the guilty while by no means clearing the guilt. Mercy and justice meet and kiss at the cross. Teach the student that 34:6–7 is finally and fully understood only there, and that the God who proclaimed His name to Moses is the God who gave His Son for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God proclaims His own name and character: the fullest self-revelation in Scripture (34:6–7).
- He is merciful, gracious, patient, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving sin.
- He is also just: He will by no means clear the guilty.
- Mercy and justice are held together, not played against each other.
- The fathers-and-children clause describes real consequences, not inherited guilt (Ezekiel 18:20).
- Only the cross fully reconciles mercy and justice (Romans 3:25–26).
- At Calvary God is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus.

Discussion Prompts

- How does 34:6–7 hold together God's mercy and His justice?
- What are the two false gods we are tempted to make, and how does the real God differ?
- How does the cross answer the question of how God can forgive yet by no means clear the guilty?

Question 10

Student Question:

Read 34:29–35, where Moses' face shone after speaking with God. Looking back across these two chapters, the plea for God's presence, the showing of His glory, the proclaiming of His name, and the covenant renewed, name one specific way the Lord Jesus, in whom we behold God's glory unveiled (2 Corinthians 3:18), is forming you to seek His presence above His gifts.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone returns to Moses' shining face (34:29–35) and gathers the sweep of these two chapters. After speaking with God, Moses' face shone with reflected glory, so brightly that the people were afraid, and he veiled his face when he was not before the LORD. He carried home a borrowed radiance from being in God's presence.

Paul takes up this very scene in 2 Corinthians 3 to contrast the two covenants. The glory on Moses' face was real but fading, and the veil pictured the partial, passing nature of the old covenant. The glory of the new covenant in Christ is greater and lasting: 'we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18). What Moses had in shadow and in part, we have in Christ in fullness and forever. (This is taught not to bind the old covenant on Christians, but to show its glory surpassed.)

This question asks the student to look back across the whole lesson: the plea for God's presence, the longing to see His glory, the proclaiming of His name, the renewed covenant, and the shining face, and to name one concrete way Christ is forming him. The thread that runs through it all is seeking God's presence above His gifts.

Press for specific formation, not vague admiration. Perhaps the student needs to stop pursuing blessings while keeping God at arm's length. Perhaps he needs to cultivate a hunger to know God. Perhaps he needs to rest in the God who is both merciful and just, and to live in the unveiled glory of Christ. End on worship: the same God who showed His glory to Moses now shows it to us in the face of Jesus, and invites us to be transformed by beholding Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses' shining face was a borrowed, fading radiance from God's presence.
- Paul contrasts that fading glory with the surpassing, lasting glory of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3).
- We behold God's glory unveiled in Christ and are transformed by it (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- The thread of the lesson is seeking God's presence above His gifts.
- Formation should be specific, aimed at one concrete change.

Discussion Prompts

- What did Moses' shining face reveal, and how does Paul use it in 2 Corinthians 3?
- How is the glory of the new covenant greater than the old?
- Name one specific way Christ is forming you to seek His presence above His gifts.