

## Exodus 34:29-35

<sup>29</sup>When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not realize that the skin of his face was shining because he had been speaking with the LORD. <sup>30</sup>When Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, they were amazed that the skin of his face was shining, so they were afraid to come close to him. <sup>31</sup>Moses called to them, so Aaron and all the rulers of the community returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. <sup>32</sup>Afterward all the people of Israel came close to him, and he gave them all of the commands that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. <sup>33</sup>When Moses was finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. <sup>34</sup>But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out again. Then he would come out and tell the people of Israel what he had been commanded. <sup>35</sup>Whenever the people of Israel saw Moses' face, they would see that the skin of Moses' face was shining. Then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with the LORD again.

## Fading Glory

### I.

It was a bummer.

Moses had been up on Mount Sinai to receive the Law of the Lord directly from God himself. *That* was awesome, not a bummer.

But perhaps we should go back. Previously on “The Giving of the Law...”

Up on Mount Sinai God cut out two tablets of stone and inscribed his Law on them. Moses was to bring them to the people. God told Moses about the idolatry that was taking place at the foot of the mountain.

As he drew near the camp of the Israelites, Moses could see and hear the people singing and dancing—worshiping around a golden calf. Moses smashed the tablets of stone with God's Law at the foot of the mountain. In righteous anger, Moses burned the calf they had made, ground it into powder, scattered the ashes on the water, and made the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:20).

What followed was a period in which God suspended his relationship with the People of Israel. Moses would go into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord. As time went on, Moses asked God: “Please show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18, EHV). God said: “You cannot see my face, for no human may see me and live... <sup>22</sup>I will put you in a crevice in the rock. I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup>Then I will take away my hand, and you will see my back. But my face will not be seen” (Exodus 33:20, 22-23, EHV).

Even Moses, the most favored of all God's servants, was not worthy to see God in all his glory. In fact, no human being could possibly *handle* the glory of God— it is just too much for sinners. That's what God was telling Moses.

Finally came the word that the suspension was over. Before today's lesson, Moses had chiseled out two new tablets at the Lord's direction and had carried them up the mountain for God to re-inscribe with the Law.

It's not hard to imagine that every tiny detail of this experience would have been exquisitely imprinted on Moses' brain. What an honor it was to be in God's presence! He had learned all about his unworthiness and the unworthiness of the people, yet here he was, standing in the presence of God. Shielded from God's full glory, no doubt, but in the presence of God, none-the-less. Being permitted in the very presence of the Most High God without being destroyed because of your lack of holiness was something to be cherished. There was certainly no shame or dishonor in that.

## II.

Down Mount Sinai Moses came with the newly-chiseled tablets. Far from shame, when the people saw Moses coming down the mountain, they were suitably impressed. Frightened, even. “When Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, they were amazed that the skin of his face was shining, so they were afraid to come close to him” (Exodus 34:30, EHV).

Moses had already been established as an awe-inspiring figure. From the people’s perspective, he had presided over the plagues; at his command, the waters of the sea became high walls to pass between; *he* was the one who spoke to God on multiple occasions.

To be sure, there had been lapses of judgment on the part of the people. Perhaps they would have made excuses for themselves. What they saw was just so far beyond anything that had been seen before that they just gave up—they fell into grumbling and complaining and idol worship because they just couldn’t meet God’s standards. Moses, they thought, *could*; it was apparent in the glow coming off his face.

That is *exactly* the job of God’s Moral Law; its first purpose is to be a mirror. Look into the mirror of the Law and see that *you* haven’t met God’s standards. Perhaps you didn’t dance and sing around a golden calf, but you sat and listened and watched as a glowing screen presented images and sounds that ought to make you blush. Though you love God and come to worship, too often God gets moved off of first place in your life for something else—people in your life, or some of your things, become more important to you than God. It’s your golden calf moment, whether you realize it or not. Any choice that you make that violates any one of God’s commands is your idol at that moment in time.

Seeing the reflections of glory in Moses’ face brings all the reality crashing in. You are not worthy to stand anywhere near God and live.

“Moses called to them, so Aaron and all the rulers of the community returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. <sup>32</sup>Afterward all the people of Israel came close to him, and he gave them all of the commands that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai” (Exodus 34:31-32, EHV).

The people gathered around their awe-inspiring, somewhat frightening leader. With face glowing from the glory of the Lord, Moses spoke to them. He read to them from the tablets of stone, and repeated all the commands of God. If the events of the last days and weeks since Moses smashed the first set of tablets and ground their golden calf into powder hadn’t brought the impact of their actions crashing down on them, surely his glowing face speaking the law of God did.

They had failed. Miserably. Filled with excitement, they had once vowed: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do. We will obey” (Exodus 24:7, EHV). They *hadn’t* obeyed.

*You* haven’t obeyed. God has given his Moral Law, and you haven’t obeyed. That’s why we have the confession in the worship service. You and I *haven’t* obeyed. Sometimes we try hard, but fail. Other times we just run headlong into the misdeeds of sin, like the people of Israel running toward their golden calf.

## III.

“When Moses was finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. <sup>34</sup>But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off until he came out again. Then he would come out and tell the people of Israel what he had been commanded” (Exodus 34:33-34, EHV).

Moses put on a veil after speaking the Word of God to the people. Why? Was the veil just to differentiate the times Moses was speaking the very words of God to the people?

No. The veil was there because it was a bummer.

In the verses preceding today’s Second Lesson Paul writes: “Moses...put a veil over his face,

so that the Israelites could not continue to look at the end of the radiance, as it was fading away” (2 Corinthians 3:13, EHV). The veil was there because it was a bummer. The veil was there because Moses’ face displayed fading glory.

That’s the nature of God’s Law. It is glorious, but it has a fading glory. Paul said to the Romans: “No one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin” (Romans 3:20, EHV). The Law of God did not restore, it only convicted. It pointed out that the people needed something more.

The rules that governed Israel’s worship called for many sacrifices. Those sacrifices restored the broken relationship that the Law revealed, but they didn’t *really* restore it—the sacrifices had to be made again and again. The sacrifices really pointed ahead to the need for a *real* sacrifice—one that could take care of the problems pointed out by the Law once and for all.

The law just reveals fading glory. It’s a bummer.

#### IV.

Transfiguration Sunday revolves around the glory of the Lord Jesus. *His* glory does *not* fade. Peter, James, and John got to witness the true glory of the Lord Jesus. Today’s Gospel says: “While [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29, EHV).

Jesus wasn’t ready at that moment to let the world see all that glory, but Jesus *is* the glory—he didn’t just *reflect* it, as Moses did. Jesus Christ *is* the radiance. Jesus Christ *is* the gospel, which overshadows the fading glory of the law.

What the Israelites saw as they looked at Moses was a radiant face that terrified them. It reminded them of the righteousness and holiness of God. It showed them that God expects the same holiness from them.

We have something far superior. There are no sacrificial animals bleating in the narthex as they wait to be slaughtered to point ahead to the *real* sacrifice. Instead we have the symbol of the cross to remind us that the ultimate sacrifice has been made.

Peter, James, and John had to witness Jesus’ glory fade as they came down the Mount of Transfiguration so that Jesus could prepare to be that one sacrifice the world needed. But we have seen the results of what Jesus has done.

Lent begins this week. We watch again as Jesus takes up the impossible work of completing the ultimate sacrifice. When Lent draws to a close, we witness the joys of Easter, when we see again the unfading glory of the Lord Jesus, who completed the impossible work to take up his glory as our Savior God.

Before today’s Second Lesson Paul says: “To this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:15-16, EHV). No more is there the bummer of fading glory. When we confess our sins in the worship service, we do so with the veil already removed. We *know* that the Lord Jesus has already taken away the problem of our sin. We already *know* that the Heavenly Father has accepted his payment for our sins, and that forgiveness is ours. We know that even before the absolution, or announcement of forgiveness, is made.

When we look to the empty cross we remember that Jesus has risen from the dead and lives and rules in all his unfading glory in heaven. And we are certain that he will come again to take us to see all the glory of the Lord Jesus in its unfading brilliance. God bless your Lenten worship. Amen.