David Lundy is now a manager in a clothing store somewhere in Virginia. But many years ago he was a teenager in my youth group in Emporia, Virginia. One Sunday morning during Sunday School I was teaching a Bible study from Exodus 33, the story you just heard. After hearing about God speaking to Moses at the tent of meeting, face to face as a man speaks with his friends, David wistfully said, “I wished God would do something like that for me. If God would talk to me in a tent every day, face to face, like I’m here talking to you, it would be much easier to believe.”

David and Moses had very different experiences. Moses got to speak to God in a tent every day, face to face, like two good buddies. He had already heard God speak to him through a burning bush that didn’t burn the bush down. Moses had some dramatic encounters with God Almighty. All poor David had was a 24 year old seminary student trying to interpret a 3000 year old story. There’s not much of a comparison there.

Do you ever feel like David? You read about all these people in the Bible experiencing God in some powerful, intimate way and you’re thinking, “Why can’t that be me? What’s wrong with me.” Or perhaps you’re in a SS class or a small group and someone is talking about their wonderful encounters with God and you’re thinking, “When will I get it?”

We have a problem don’t we. We’re mortal human beings trying to have a relationship with an immortal God. It’s hard enough to have a relationship with someone very much like yourself. With a friend you can have a cup of coffee together. You can go fishing together or talk at leisure floating gently on a secluded pond. You can shake hands, hug, or maybe give one another the newly popular chest bump. You know what your friend looks like and when he leaves, the image of his face can return quickly to your mind. But how can we modern Christians have an intimate relationship with God? Or put another way, “How can we sustain a relationship with a being so different from any other, imperceptible by the five senses?”

In a sense, stories like this from the OT add to our angst. Very casually, we read in the 33rd chapter of Exodus about Moses encountering God in an extremely personal way. Moses is able to see God, or at least parts of God. He has a relationship with God, they meet in a particular location, and he’s able to negotiate with God about their future relationship. We read about this and think, “Why can’t this happen to me?”

And because it doesn’t, many people begin to look with suspicion on these ancient stories: “They’re just folklore to bolster the faith of a superstitious people,” many moderns say. But stories like this don’t easily bolster the faith of 21st century Christians. They seem odd and exotic. Not encouraging and helpful.

Or else we’re like my friend David in Virginia who believes the stories are true, but only wishes they could be true for him. Just once, we would like to have an intimate conversation with God like Moses did so we would know without a shadow of a doubt He is real. We might even try to extract some pearl of truth from his Infinite storecase of wisdom. We’d ask him all the questions about God, life, eternity, and why are the Tarheels so bad this year.
That’s the question isn’t it? How can I have an intimate relationship with God? How can I know a God I can’t see in the flesh, hear with my ears, touch with my hands, taste with my lips, or smell with my nose?

**Context**

Let’s begin trying to answer that by understanding the context of this provocative story of Moses at the Tent of Meeting. This tent of meeting episode is following right on the heels of the golden calf debacle. Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments from the finger of God, but before God’s writing finger had cooled down, the people had already started to rebel against God and Moses. They created a golden calf and began to worship it at the foot of the sacred mountain. Moses was furious, threw the stone tablets at the golden calf, and holy war erupted. Three thousand idolaters were killed.

Moses is angry with the people and anxious about his future as their leader and his place in God’s business. Moses is in a precarious situation.

You can see how serious the matter is when God says in essence, “The gig is up. The relationship is over. I’m not hanging around with you guys anymore. Listen to how he puts it in Ex 33:3: “But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Woe Nellie! That’s not the kind of God we want to learn about is it? A God who dares not come with us where we are going lest he destroy us! God is angry and he has to decide what he’s going to do with this stiff-necked people. He’s declaring he’s not going with them to the Promised Land. And what kind of Promised Land could it possibly be if God isn’t there. A land flowing with milk and honey isn’t all that great if God is absent.

**The Tent of Meeting**

So here’s where we pick up the story. Moses and God would meet at a tent Moses pitched outside of camp every day. Anyone could go to this tent to inquire of the Lord. Evidently nothing extraordinary happened when people inquired of the Lord at this tent of meeting. But when Moses went, well that was a horse of a different color. When Moses went the cloud of God’s Presence would descend on the tent and the two of them would talk. The text says, “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (33:11). The people of Israel witnessed this and it moved them to worship God. They were awestruck. When Moses would finally leave the tent, young Joshua hung around hoping for a sequel of some kind. And who could blame him?

There is one thing I need to clear up before we go on. There is some apparent contradiction in the text for today about whether or not Moses saw God face to face. In verse 11 we’re told that “the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” Later, in the account we hear God saying, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (v 20). The Lord describes how he is going to pass by Moses and put his hand over Moses’ face while doing this and says, “Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (v 23). So which one is it? Did Moses see God face to face or not? What’s going on here?
This is where a careful reading of the text as opposed to a casual reading is needed. In verse 11 it doesn’t say that Moses saw God face to face. What does the text say? It says God spoke to Moses face to face. God is the subject, not Moses. God is speaking, not Moses is seeing. God is speaking face to face is a figurative way to affirm the personal nature of God’s conversation with Moses. There’s an intimate communion that is happening. This is remarkable enough on its own merit, but if you keep in mind that God and the people of Israel are in a relational crisis, and that God has just declared he’s not going with Moses and the people into the Promised Land, the graciousness of the intimacy is heightened all the more. This isn’t just a couple of buddies hoisting a cold one and talking about the good ol’ days. This is a personal, intimate conversation with between the Creator of the Covenant and the mediator of the covenant. So let’s be clear and answer our critics who use this text as just another example of contradictions in the Bible. There is no contradiction. In verse 11, we’re informed of the personal and intimate nature of God and Moses’ relationship. It’s initiated and nurtured by a personal God who invites Moses into an intimate relationship. In verses 20 and 23 we’re learning that even Moses doesn’t experience the fullness of the Almighty God. Moses is a close as any man has been to God at this point in history, but even Moses doesn’t get to see the face of God.

Now that we’ve cleared that up, what can we find in this text that might show us the path toward intimacy with God. I don’t know that everyone wants to be intimate with God, but for those who do, there are some markers in this text which point the way forward.

I. Intimacy with God is a result of spending time with God.

Some people want intimacy with God without spending time with God. In that case, I would say they really don’t want intimacy. They would like access to the power of God, perhaps, but they really don’t want intimacy. Being intimate with God means getting to know God and we don’t get to know God in a day or over a weekend. Like any other relationship intimacy takes time to develop. Let’s remember that Moses was 80 years old when he pitched his tent and invited God to have these conversations. He had already been with God on Mount Sinai for such a long period of time that many people assumed that he had died or gotten himself lost. This is not some fresh out of seminary preacher who has learned a few theological terms to impress his congregation. This is a man of God, who’s been through the desert with a tribe of stiff-necked people. He has been on the holy mountain where God has revealed himself in a powerful way. And now, as an 80 year old man he’s regularly going away from the crowd to spend some face to face time with God.

The Bible is filled with admonitions to spend time with God. We’re instructed to pray without ceasing, not to burden us and guilt us into prayer closets on a 24 hour basis, but as a way to encourage us to nurture our relationship with God.

* Paul wrote the Romans, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Rom 12:12).
* To the Ephesians, “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Eph 6:8).
* To the Colossians, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watching in it with thanksgiving” (Col 4:2).
*And to the Philippians, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6).

Do you see the path we must take to have intimacy with God? It doesn’t come automatically. We must want it, want it with a consuming passion. A little prayer sprinkled here and there is simply not enough. Oh no, if you want intimacy with God, as Moses had intimacy, your desire for God must become an acute fever. It must be something that you want to do, not something that you feel duty bound to do. It must come from passion, not obligation. Like Moses going to the tent of meeting outside the reach of the distractions of camp life, we must pitch our tent in a place where we can focus on God face to face. We’ve got to want to listen to God as much as an 18 year old wants to read her text messages in her inbox. Why do teenagers clutch their cellphones with such irrational fervor? One word: Connection. They want to be connected to their friends more than anything else. And when we want to be connected to God with such irrational exuberance, intimacy with God emerges.

Besides a passionate determination to spend time with God, intimacy with God is nurtured a second way.

II. Intimacy with God comes with knowledge

We’re given a glimpse of a conversation Moses had with God beginning in verse 12. He reminds God that God called him to lead these people, that God knows him by name and that he has found favor in the eyes of God. So Moses wants to test God a bit. He says, “If you are pleased with me show me your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favor with you” (33:13).

That’s a pretty amazing request in light of all the possible requests that could be made. This man of favor could have asked for wealth or power. He could’ve asked for a guarantee that the people would listen to him, follow him, and recognize his authority over them. His request revealed no hint of selfishness or lust for power. It revealed a genuine desire to know and understand the ways of God. Moses understood a good number of things. He spent 40 years in the best Egyptian schools growing up in Pharaoh’s household. He knew Egyptian culture. He spent another 40 years in the desert as a nomadic shepherd. He knew about the desert. Moses understood something of the desert having lived as a nomadic shepherd. What Moses didn’t know and needed to know was the ways of God. That’s always our greatest need, to know the ways of God.

All the biblical writers have understood this. The Psalmist said, “Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth” (Ps 86:11). The disciples pleaded with Jesus, “Lord teach us how to pray.” Jesus himself taught the principle to his disciples saying, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Mt 7:24). Listening and learning, must accompany being together if intimacy is to grow.

This knowledge is not a mere holding of information. We’re not built like computers to simply store information. Knowledge of God isn’t a matter of memorizing Bible verses in order to debate biblical issues with skill. It is only valuable knowledge when it translates into a life that emulates God. Too many people treat prayer as some kind of candy machine. Put in your coin, pull a lever, and get what you want from God. They wonder why God doesn’t answer their prayers, but never consider what kind of
commitment they’ve made to God. They want answers with no relationship. They want results with no knowledge, or only superficial knowledge of God and God’s ways. They want intimacy with God as if he’s some kind of Facebook friend they can spy on whenever they feel like it. Moses wants to know the ways of God so he could lead the people as God would lead them. He wants to know the ways of God so he can model the compassion, wisdom, and love of God before the people.

Thomas Merton, one of the most spiritually wise men of the 20th century who lived in monastery in Kentucky, wrote a great deal about intimacy with God. In a letter to God he penned these words, “How do we begin to know You are until we begin ourselves to be something of what you are? We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely to God in humble submission and love. We do not first see, then act; we act, then see…. And that is why the man who waits to see clearly before he will believe, never starts on the journey.”

Merton is explaining what Moses meant by the request “teach me your ways.” It was a commitment to follow God into the desert and do, act, think, behave as God would. And if we are going to enjoy intimacy with God we will have to become something of what Christ is. We can’t wait until we understand everything to seek intimacy. We only discover intimacy as we give ourselves to the ways of the Lord. The more we become like Christ, the more intimacy we will have with God.

There is one more aspect of intimacy we should we discover in this fascinating episode in the life of Moses.

III. Intimacy has limitations

When Moses had secured from God the promise of Presence and Favor, he pushed the envelope just a bit further. Just like two friends negotiating what level of intimacy they will honor, Moses asks God to show him his glory. Now you need to understand this wasn’t like asking God for his autograph. Or even for some kind of special miracle or anointing. Moses was asking God to reveal his awesome, magisterial presence. It was something like an overpowering light. Moses was seeking to draw closer, dangerously close to the very core of God’s own self. He wanted not just God’s Presence. He wanted God’s Essence!

In this request, Moses crossed the line. He wanted to, in some way, erase the line between immortal God and mortal man. He wanted to tear down all walls that separated man from God. He wanted complete and unlimited access to the Holy of Holies, to the soul of God.

God didn’t strike Moses down for being so brash. He responded by giving Moses 4 affirmations:

1) I will make all my goodness pass before you.
2) I will proclaim before you my name “Yahweh”
3) I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious
4) I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy

These four statements are astonishingly generous, but guarded. They were promises of God’s personal goodness and support for Moses, but they stopped short of full disclosure. After the affirmation God put it like this to Moses, “But you cannot see my face, for no one can see my face and live” (v 20).
And then we have one of the oddest scenes in all the Bible. The text tells us that the Lord said to Moses that he could stand near God on some cleft in a rock. Essentially it was a hole in a rock wall. Talk about having tickets on the 50 yard line of the Super Bowl. The view wouldn’t get any better than this. Then, God would cover Moses with his hand until he passed by. Then God would remove his hand and Moses could see God, but only his back. His face couldn’t be seen.

What we have in this wonderfully fascinating narrative is an inspired truth that God’s glory is simply too much for man to handle. Moses surely would’ve died if he had looked at God’s face, because that would’ve erased all boundaries between Moses and God. To say that Moses could only look at God’s back, doesn’t mean that Moses could look at the back of God’s pants as opposed to the front of God’s pants. It meant that Moses could have access to God, but not unlimited access. He could have a relationship with God, but it would be as unequals. God is always going to be God, and humans are always going to be humans. We can’t erase the line. To do so would mean death and annihilation. It would mean the end to humanity.

The application to this in regards to our prayers is the counterweight to last week’s message. Last week we saw how Abraham was treated as a real partner with God. He was allowed, even encouraged to challenge God. And Abraham’s petitions and negotiations with God actually had an influence on God. That was our invitation to pray daring prayers, to challenge God, and know that our prayers have an impact on God’s activity in the world.

This account of Moses seeking to behold the glory of God is a reminder that we are not equal with God. We are partners but unequal partners. We can influence God but we don’t dictate to God. We can challenge God, but God is free and can put us in our place whenever he wants to. The name it claim it theology so prevalent today is an attempt to control God, to have full access to God, to dictate to God what God must do. In his book on Prayer Yancey has written, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. Prayer offers no ironclad guarantees—just the certain promise that we need not live that mystery alone.” The denial of Moses’ request to see the face of God is for his own good. Only God knows how to handle the power within his grasp. Only God can harness the glory of his presence in a way that won’t annihilate us. It is for our own good that we don’t get everything we ask for, even if what we are asking seems totally reasonable and in keeping with our understanding of God’s character and history with his people. God is doing us a favor by maintaining the boundaries between himself and us. In doing this God is showing us his favor, his goodness, his mercy and his compassion.

Conclusion

Fanny Crosby the prolific Baptist hymn writer of the 19th century wrote a hymn describing the blessing of being hid in the cleft of the rock. She interpreted this passage as pointing to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who hides us and protects us in the cleft of the rock. There we experience all the blessings we are able to handle, but we’re protected from the dangers of seeing God’s face. Do you remember the hymn?
A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord,
   A wonderful Savior to me;
He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
   Where rivers of pleasure I see.

With numberless blessings each moment he crowns,
   And filled with a fullness divine,
I sing in my rapture, O glory to God
   For such a Redeemer as mine!

He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock
   That shadows a dry, thirsty land;
He hideth my life in the depths of his love,
   And covers me there with his hand,
   And covers me there with his hand.

Do not fret when God denies some request you have made. God knows best. He knows the future, the past, and the present. Sometimes what we want is not in our best interests nor is it in the great plan of God. Be content with experiencing all his goodness, mercy, compassion, and knowing that he knows your name. One day the glory of God will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. Amen.