

When Moses returned, those who had sinned were severely judged. Yet even those who had not actually been involved bore their share of the responsibility. How could God identify Himself with such a sinful people?

Yet it was just this, the presence of God, that made Israel distinct. As Moses prayed, “How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people unless You go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (33:16) God’s presence distinguished His people from all others.

In the presence of God there must be found a remedy for the constant outbreak of sin which so threatened Israel—and which threatens you and me today.¹

The Promise of God’s Presence: Restoration (Ex. 33:1–23)

The passage.—God’s presence would be forfeited if the Jews follow other gods, or trifle with idolatry as with the golden calf. His presence would be assured by renewal and rededication. Here God orders the removal of the “ornaments.” These must have been religious trinkets or medallions. They suggest another form of compromise and God will have none of it.

Special points.—At this point, the story introduces “the tent of meeting.” This was a simple tent structure and was quite different from the tabernacle. The important point and the important similarity is both tent and tabernacle represented the vital presence of God. The tent idea of God’s presence also implies God’s mobility. God will go on with Moses and the people—on through the wilderness, on to Canaan. He is a moving God and expects his people to move forward with him.

And God’s promise includes not only his assured presence, but “I will give you rest.” This rest would have deep and symbolic significance to a pilgrim people, always tired, but always being summoned to go on and on toward Canaan. The promise to Moses is this: the face of God will lead you and your men to that promised rest. In the New Testament the author of Hebrews interprets this “rest” in both historic (Canaan) and spiritual dimensions (the City of God, regardless of history or geography).

Truth for today.—Moses, like all men, is curious to see God. But this longing can only be partially granted. The Lord does reveal himself: in his power and goodness, by his name and self-disclosure, by his grace and mercy. Yet there is a place and point where God stops our curiosity. He says “You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” This is not just to prevent familiarity, and maintain a sense of awe and mystery. This deep insight means no man can know God fully, or apprehend him completely. In addition it means God will always be the God of the beyond.

In never seeing his face, we must be content to behold his back—at least in this life and pilgrimage. Whatever one may experience or understand of God, there is always more, much more. He is inexhaustible. This is why the Lord’s glory is revealed, yet hidden. And for this same reason the human quest to see him and know him must ever remain an unending quest²

Although God instructed Moses to lead the Israelites into Canaan, and promised to fulfill his prior commitment to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he would not go with them. He feared that further acts of rebellion might cause him to destroy the people on the way. When Moses reported this to the people, they were deeply grieved. As a further mark of God’s disapproval of their actions, they were commanded to remove the ornaments which they had received at the time of their departure from Egypt and which by this stage had undoubtedly become a vivid reminder of how God had blessed them. Their removal, like the discarding of an engagement or wedding ring, symbolized the broken relationship which now existed between God and the people.³

¹ Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). *The teacher’s commentary* (107). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Langley, R. (1972). Exodus. In F. H. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The teacher’s Bible commentary* (F. H. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs, Ed.) (77). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

³ *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition*. 1994 (D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer & G. J. Wenham, Ed.) (4th ed.) (117). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.