



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

Hidden...

Exodus 33:1-23

My grandfather had talked my father into helping him burn-off the “**lower forty**” on his farm. Now, the interesting thing about that is that my grandfather did not have a lower forty. His whole farm was only sixty-five acres and the “**lower-forty**” he wanted to “**burn-off**” was really only the “**lower-sixteen**” or at most the “**lower-eighteen.**” Of course, the “**lower sixteen**” isn’t quite as poetic as the “**lower forty**” but all that is beside the point. The point is my grandfather intended to “**burn off**” his field and that meant he intended to set it on fire.

Now, the reason he wanted to set it on fire was because it had gone uncultivated for several years and the weeds, though dead now with the winter, had grown up to five or six feet in height. Burning off the pasture was a practical way to get rid of the weeds to prepare the field to be plowed later that spring. But when you are nine or ten years old and have the prospect of seeing a really big fire, such details are not very important. I was giddy with excitement.

In preparation, my dad hooked up my grandfather’s red Farmall tractor and plowed several loops around the field. He did that to prevent the fire from burning over into the field next door. The idea was that the fire would race

across the pasture burn up all the weeds come to the fresh dirt of the plowed boundary and stop there simply because there was nothing left to burn.

When my dad finished plowing the field, my grandfather took a small can of kerosene and drove down to the other end of the pasture and began to splash kerosene around on the far edge of the weeds. Then a few seconds later, I could see him throwing matches onto the weeds. Suddenly, the pasture still damp with winter rain burst into flame.

It was surprising to me then as a small boy and is still surprising to me even today just how fast the fire came across the field. The flames shot up into the air some twelve to fifteen feet and roared and crackled and whistled as they barreled down on us. When the wall of flame was still a fifty or sixty yards off, I remember how it burned my face and how my eyes watered from the smoke and from the heat. I was no longer giddy with excitement. I was absolutely awestruck with the majestic terror of the fire.

When the flames were thirty yards from us I thought I was going to catch fire myself. I was smart enough to take shelter behind my dad. Oh, I wanted to watch the fire. I wanted to see that last strip of weeds heave in the hot wind, stand up straight and then burst into flame. I wanted to watch them vaporize, almost instantly, into black ash but I just could not bear the fire itself. It was so awesome, so frightful and so hot that I simply could not endure the terror of the thing face to face. When the flames finally burned out ten yards in front of my dad, I had my face buried in the small of his back with both arms tucked in just to keep them from bursting into flame.

Now, at the time I didn't think my dad was aware that I had even been standing behind him. I was a little ashamed of not being able to face the fire like a man. But later I realized that he had stood there like the rock that he was just to protect me, just to shelter me, just to **mediate** the heat, the smoke and the fire for his terrified ten-year-old son. You see he had acted as a go-between to **mediate** the devastating effects of the fire. He had endured what I could not endure and he had done so because of a desire to protect me from the intense heat. He had hidden me from the fire.

Now, I wanted to tell you that story, this morning, because our text contains almost exactly the same idea and because I wanted to introduce you in a practical way to the theological idea or concept of "**mediation.**" In our text this morning, Exodus 33, we are going to see God mediate a confrontation between Moses and the most terrifying, most devastating, most dangerous thing in the entire universe...God, Himself. If I could say it plainly, in Exodus 33 God saves Moses from God.

Now before we look at the text I want to take a minute and explain what I mean when I use the word "**mediate**" or "**mediator.**" On its simplest level, to "**mediate**" means to be in the middle. The filling of an Oriole cookie, for example, mediates between the two sides. In the same way, mothers often "**mediate**" in their homes. They get in the middle of, or act as go-betweens in fights between their kids. Sometimes, in the business world go-betweens are called on to "**mediate**" between two groups that seem beyond reconciliation, groups like labor and management or like players and owners. But, even inanimate objects can act as "**mediators.**" A hot pad or a potholder mediates the heat of an oven-baked lasagna to a bare hand. Vaccinations mediate the danger

of contagious diseases to a healthy body. Bars on a cage at the zoo mediate the relationships between small children and hungry lions.

You see sometimes **“mediators”** are needed because there are huge differences between two people or groups of people. Sometimes, **“mediators”** are needed because a direct face-to-face confrontation between two groups might be dangerous. **In the case of our relationship to God, both things are true.**

What I want to pose for your consideration this morning is this; **“Sinful man simply cannot endure, cannot abide, cannot withstand the direct withering blast of God’s holy and awesome presence; God’s presence must be mediated¹.”**

Now, having said that let me set the scene where we are putting into the text this morning. In Exodus chapter 32 Moses had been up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law of God written by the finger of God, when God suddenly spoke to him and said:

^{NIV} Exodus 32:7...“Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

You see the people had taken off their jewelry and Aaron had cast it into a golden calf and the people had proclaimed that the stupid, lifeless, idiotic calf that had risen out of the flames was, in fact, the visible manifestation of their God and that *it* had delivered them out of the bondage of Egypt². God was, of course, insulted and outraged by their sin and by the way they had minimized His glory.

When God spoke to Moses about the people, He completely disowned them. He didn't even want His name attached to them. He even changed their designation from **"my people whom I brought out of Egypt"** to **"your people, whom you brought out of Egypt."**

Then, God made Moses this extraordinary offer.

^{NIV} Exodus 32:10..."Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Now I want you to consider the extraordinary nature of the offer God was making Moses. God was offering to wipe the historical slate clean and to start over and to make Moses the new Father of the nation. God was offering to make Moses the new Abraham, to eliminate the twelve tribes and to raise up a nation in which he would stand as the great human fountainhead. But Moses simply was not interested. He didn't even respond to God's offer. Instead, he pleaded with God to forgive His people on the basis of God's own covenantal faithfulness, on the basis of His reputation before unbelievers and on the basis of the promises He had made to the patriarchs³. Listen to how Moses responds:

^{NIV} Exodus 32:11..."O LORD, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. "

Then Moses went even further and added this extraordinary statement because he wanted God to understand the depth of his affection, the depth of the union he himself felt for this stiff-necked, wayward people.

^{NIV} Exodus 32:32... "But now, please forgive their sin-- but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

You see, what Moses was doing was acting as a go-between, a peacemaker, a mediator between God and His people. It was not that Moses was able to bear God's anger in their place. Rather, and I say this reverently, it was as if Moses was holding up the mirror of history before the face of God and saying, **"Look at all you have done for your people. Are You really going to abandon them now?"**

Of course, when Moses came down off the mountain and found the people dancing around the golden calf, he too was incensed by their sin. He even lashed out in righteous indignation and anger against the people but there is a sense in which even then he mediated God's judgment to the people. He threw down the two tablets of the law God and broke them to pieces because he did not deem them worthy to receive them. He burned the golden calf, ground it into a powder, threw it into their drinking water and made them drink it. And he ordered the Levites to go through the camp and to kill the worst of the offenders. Still, even that did not seem to propitiate God, to turn aside His anger.

You see, God no longer wanted to be in this people's presence. He no longer wanted to go with them and that is precisely, this morning, where we are going to put into the text. Follow along as I read starting in Exodus 33:1.

^{NIV} Exodus 33:1... Then the LORD said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' ² I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ³ Go up to the land flowing with milk and

honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."

Now, I don't know about you but I find that passage remarkable. It is remarkable because God says in the same breath, **"I am going to bless you. I am going to give you the land of Canaan. But I am not going to go with you because if I do, I will almost certainly have to destroy you."**

Now, let me ask you, **"Why would He say such a dreadful thing?"**

I think God said what He said because He knew what He was like and He knew what they were like and He knew that if He dwelt in their midst they would always be in danger of His righteous judgment breaking out against them. You see God knew perfectly well that, **"Sinful man simply could not endure, cannot abide, cannot withstand the direct withering blast of His holy and awesome presence; He knew His presence had to be mediated."**

But Moses didn't fully comprehend that yet. Moses only considered the fact that unless God was with them they were done for and he was right about that. He knew that in and of themselves, they had no strength. He knew their only hope of survival in the land of Canaan was tied to the reality of God's presence and he was right about that too. So in verse 12, Moses begged God not to send an angel with them but to come with them Himself because these people, sinful and stiff-necked as they were, were His people.

^{NIV} **Exodus 33:12...Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.'"** ¹³ If

you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

Now in verse 14, the Lord responds favorably to Moses request but I want to point out to you that His favor is limited to Moses alone. Look at verse 14.

^{NIV} Exodus 33:14...The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

You see what God says is this, **"I will go with you, Moses."** The word **"you"** here is singular in Hebrew, not plural. God was saying to Moses, **"I am not going to go with them but I will go with you."** But Moses simply would not be separated from his people. He kept on trying to smooth things out, to act as a go between, to placate, to mediate this...this broken relationship. You can see that especially in verse 15. Notice how he keeps connecting himself to the people and to God.

^{NIV} Exodus 33:15...Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶ 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?"

You see what Moses keeps saying is this, **"Oh God, my heart is with this people...my heart is with your people. Oh God, go with me...go with us, your people."**

And God responds to that in verse 17.

^{NIV} **Exodus 33:17**...And the LORD said to Moses, **"I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."**

Now what God says there is something like this, **"Alright, I will go with this people because I am pleased with you, Moses."** You see, what God is saying is that He has accepted Moses mediation and will continue His relationship with Israel because of His relationship with Moses.

Now to me, all that is remarkable. It seems to me that Moses pleads with God, begs God time after time to be merciful to this people and time after time God gives in to Moses' requests. Now, I know full well that God knew all along what He was going to do. I know that He used these circumstances to mold the heart of Moses into that of great shepherd leader. I know that God was teaching Moses something of the nature of His great covenant faithfulness. But I still think the interchange between the Lord and Moses is remarkable.

It is perhaps all the more remarkable because of the contrast it sets up with what follows in verse 18. You see, when we get down to verse 18, we find there that Moses asks God to do one more thing. But when he does, God tells him flatly and without equivocation, **"No. I won't do that." And what was that thing Moses asked? Look at verse 18.**

^{NIV} **Exodus 33:18**...Then Moses said, **"Now show me your glory."**

Now, I want you to notice how God answers his request. He doesn't chastise Moses for being **"stupid or presumptuous."** He didn't even seem to be angry that Moses has asked to see His glory. But He does make it clear that He is not going to grant Moses' request just as He makes it clear Moses does not

understand the nature of what he has asked.⁴ God is going to deny Moses request not because He is angry with Moses, quite the contrary. He is going to deny Moses' request because of His great love and compassion for Moses. Look at God's extraordinary word to Moses in verse 19:

^{NIV} Exodus 33:19...And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

That is God's way of saying this, **"I will let you see a visible representation of some of My goodness. I will even let you my audible voice say My holy, secret name. But I will not let you see Me as I am because you could not endure it and live."**

You see God knew that **Moses simply could not endure, could not abide, could not withstand the direct withering blast of His holy and awesome presence** and in mercy and compassion He determined to protect His servant, a servant whom He loved, by mediating His presence to him⁵. Look at verse 21.

^{NIV} Exodus 33:21...Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²² When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³ Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Do you understand what God is saying? He is saying, **"Moses I am going to let you see some of my glory. But in doing that, I must protect you from my unrestrained presence and holiness, so I am going to hide you in the cleft of**

the rock and cover you there until it is safe and when it's safe I will let you see the visible after trail of my glory⁶."

Now, I have been moving toward a single point and I want to come at last to that point. You see though Moses acted occasionally in the role of mediator between God and His people, Israel, he was not *the* Mediator. Maybe I should say it like this, **"Moses, the great mediator of the people of Israel, needed a mediator himself to shelter him from the presence of Almighty God."** You see the **"cleft of the rock"** was more than just a hollow place in the face of the mountain; it was a person. The **"sheltering hand of God"** was more than just a thick cloud to obscure Moses' view; it was a person. Both things were a person in exactly the same way that the rock that followed them around in the wilderness was a person. They were a person in the same way that the Shekinah glory of God was a person. They were a person in the same way that the manna that fell from heaven and sustained the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness was a person. You see all of those things were types and figures and partial manifestations of the glorious reality of *the* Mediator that our God would one day provide.

You see, all of those things pointed to Christ.

Now the reality of that truth is something that the Apostle Paul understood perfectly well. Listen to how he alludes to this very passage in Colossians:

^{NIV} **Colossians 3:1**...Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Of course the glorious reality of Christ being our great hiding place is not limited to just the authors God used to pen the Bible. It is a truth something hymn writers have long understood and the notion pervades our hymnal. I am thinking especially of that wonderful hymn by Fanny Crosby.

He Hideth My Soul⁷

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
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.

Now brothers and sisters, the reality of being hidden in Christ is something I desperately want you to understand. It is a truth I want you to append to you souls. That is why this morning, brothers and sisters, I have a word from the Lord for you. **“If you are hidden in Christ with God this morning, you are at peace with God. The Lord Jesus, Himself, stands as a faithful and enduring mediator between your sinfulness and the unrelenting, withering blast of God’s holy presence.”**

Now, I am saying that, this morning, knowing full well that some of you are deeply concerned about other things. Some of you are growing older and feeling something of the frailty and feebleness of the flesh. Some of you are lonely and some of you have broken relationships that weigh heavy on your hearts. Some of you are worried about college, about jobs, about your health, about your retirement. I know that some of you are worried about the spiritual welfare of

your children, your friends or even your parents. I say what I say knowing that some of you are struggling with issues of identity and finding your place in the world. And I know that some of you are fearful because the world has become such a dangerous place.

Now, brothers and sisters, those things are important but what are those things really compared to the fact that one day you will stand in the presence of Almighty God righteous and blameless before Him because of what Christ has done for you. In that day, you will stand before His penetrating, relentless, searching holiness and you will be mindful of one thing only and this is it, **“My sins are washed away and I am safe in the Cleft of the Rock covered over by the nail-pierced hand of the Son of God, who makes me, even me, to be at peace in the withering blast of God’s unrelenting holiness. Praise be to God, I am hidden in Christ.”**

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Hosea*, Lecture Ninth. He writes: Let us then know that God cannot from the heart be worshipped by us, except when we behold him in the person of his Son, and know him to be a kind Father to us: hence John says, ‘He who honors not the Son, honors not the Father,’ Earlier in the same lecture he writes: “This doctrine is especially useful to us; for it shows that God is not to be sought except in Christ the mediator. Whosoever, then, forsakes Christ, forsakes God himself; for as John says, ‘He who has not the Son, has not the Father.’ And the thing itself proves this; for God dwells in light inaccessible; how great, then is the distance between us and him? Except Christ, then, presents himself to us as a middle person, how can we come to God?”

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983) 413. I am not sure Cassuto is right when he writes: “Although Aaron intended only to present the people with a palpable symbol, a kind of empty throne, as stated above, the Israelites went astray after the concrete representation, and treated it as an actual deity, *and they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!* Not without reason is the plural used here, *These... brought [plural] you up*. Scripture does not attribute to the children of Israel the foolish idea that it was the calf that had just now been fashioned that brought them up from the land of Egypt; they could not possibly have forgotten what Moses had caused them to see and hear in the name of the Lord. The meaning of this proclamation is that they regarded the calf as an emblem of the

Lord, and they considered this emblem itself worthy of divine honor, thus making the calf a partner, as it were, of the Lord.”

³ Ibid, 417. He writes: “Therefore the Torah comes to teach us three things avert calamity: the Lord’s love for His creatures; the glory of the Divine Name; the merit of the Patriarchs.”

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume 1.11.3. He writes: “Therefore Moses, to whom, nevertheless, God revealed himself more intimately than to the others, did not succeed by prayers in beholding that face; but he received the answer that man is not able to bear such great brightness.” See also: Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Ch. 6:1-5. Calvin writes there: “This was the common and ordinary sign which the Lord employed with his ancient people; for we read that, whenever Moses entered into the tabernacle, *smoke* was wont to be diffused through it in such a manner that the people could not see either Moses or the tabernacle. The *smoke*, therefore, which Isaiah describes was not an unusual occurrence; but in the ordinary way God intended to demonstrate that he would display his power in executing judgment on the people. But it may be asked, “Why did God manifest his presence by this sign rather than by any other? This question may be answered in two ways. First, it was always the will of God to repress the insolence of men, in pushing their inquiries about his majesty beyond what is proper; for on this point almost all men are too rash and daring.” See also: John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, Ch. 1:15-18. He writes: “They say so with reference to their own time; but they did not see God in any other way than wrapped up in many folds of figures and ceremonies. That vision which Moses obtained on the mountain was remarkable and more excellent than almost all the rest; and yet God expressly declares, “thou shalt not be able to see my face, only thou shalt see my back.”

⁵ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Harmony of the Law, Volume 3* “Hence we may gather that God’s paternal favor towards them is pointed out in that He spared them; for we must bear in mind what is said elsewhere, “There shall no man see my face and live.” Exodus 33:20.) Thus, amongst the ancients, this was a kind of proverbial expression: We shall die, because we have seen God. So Jacob, in commendation of God’s grace, says, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” Genesis 32:30.) For if the mountains melt at the sight of Him, what must needs happen to a mortal man, than whom there is nothing more frail or feeble? Herein, then, does God’s incomparable lenity betray itself, when, in manifesting Himself to His elect, He does not altogether absorb and reduce them to nothing; especially when some special vision is presented to them. In sum, therefore, Moses shows us that it was a miracle that the rulers of Israel remained safe and sound, although the terrible majesty of God had appeared to them.”

⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: Christologia Volume 1, Chapter 5*. He writes: “That God is in himself absolutely incomprehensible unto us, is a necessary effect of our infinite distance from him. But as he externally represents himself unto us, and by the notions which are in generated in us by the effects of his properties, are our conceptions of him: Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20. This is declared in the answer given unto that request of Moses: “I beseech thee, show me thy glory:” Exodus 33:18. Moses had heard a voice speaking unto him, but he that spoke was “in thick darkness” — he saw him not. Glorious evidences he gave of his majestic presence, but no appearance was made of his essence or person. Hereon Moses desired, for the full satisfaction of his soul, (as the nearer any one is unto God the more earnest will be his desire after the full fruition of him,) that he might have a sight of his glory — not of that created glory in the tokens

of his presence and power which he had beheld, but of the untreated glory of his essence and being.”

⁷ Fanny J. Crosby and William J. Kirkpatrick, *He Hideth My Soul*