

The Revelation of the Divine Character

Distilled from Chapter 3 of 'Who Is God?' by Richard Bauckham

My previous talk looked at the book of Exodus and God's revelation to Moses of his 'Name', which revealed his commitment to the people he has created, along with his insistence that he is completely self-sufficient. He does *not* give humans control over him by revealing his name, but he *is* inviting them to a relationship with him.

Today's talk stays with Exodus and Moses, and gives us an answer to the question, 'What is God like?', 'What does his commitment to us as his people look like in practice?'

After the burning bush episode, the book of Exodus recounts the events of how God got the Israelites out of Egypt, including the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and plenty of grumbling from the Israelites.

They eventually reach Mount Sinai, where God makes his promise to be their God 'official', with what people in that time called a 'covenant', where the ruler promises to look after his people, in exchange for their obedience and devotion to him.

Notice that God offers this covenant agreement *after* he has rescued Israel from the Egyptians. As in so many Bible passages, God acts first and asks later.

Moses goes alone to the top of the mountain where God presents him with the covenant (what we now call the Ten Commandments) written on two pieces of stone.

However while Moses is with God, the Israelites become edgy about their situation. What if Moses doesn't return? What if he has got too close to God and been killed? They propose a 'Plan B' to Aaron, persuading him to make a golden calf which they can worship to represent the 'gods' that brought them out of Egypt.

The Israelites are not comfortable with a God who they can't control. They want a god they can see, touch and carry around with them, or not if they so choose. Humans haven't changed that much in 3,000 years! God realises what is going on (well, he is God) and tells Moses about it before saying...

“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.”

Exodus 32:10

This fits well with the popular idea of the 'Rambo' God of the Old Testament. God is going to destroy the existing Israelite community, and let Moses and his descendants become his covenant people. This is a terrifying 'flood' moment.

But in what follows we are shown that the God of the Bible is not the ogre God that many people portray him to be.

Moses, despite the fact that the Israelites have made life extremely difficult for him even before he was their leader, pleads with God not to destroy them, to restore his covenant with them, and to continue with them on their journey.

And God listens to Moses. I'm not sure we will ever fully understand the verses that talk about God 'changing his mind'. When the infinite meets the finite, there will always be unexplained stuff. The Bible is God's revelation of who he is and how he works to the people he created. And as such, it has to be understandable to them. That's one of the reasons there are so many stories about real people in the Bible.

God is pure, unbounded truth and love. He is utterly independent. He, as the name he chose to reveal to Moses makes clear, simply is. He has no beginning, no end. He does not depend on the time and space that he creates and sustains.

But, he is not a distant God, he did not create the universe and then simply let it run its course. The universe we live in is utterly dependent

on his continual involvement. If for just one moment he stopped being dynamically involved with his creation, it would disintegrate and vanish. And he would not be damaged or diminished in any way.

And there is no way that we can understand why a God like that would choose to create people like us. Why he continues to love and care for us even when we rebel against him, or simply ignore him.

What we do know is that the Bible texts tell us that God wants to be in a relationship with us. When we pray, he listens. He *really* listens. Our prayers matter. And when our prayers are genuinely focussed on knowing God's will in our and other people's situation, they matter a lot.

But back to the golden calf incident...

Here, right at the start of God's relationship with Israel they have been unfaithful to him, like a bride running off with one of the guests at her wedding. And right from the start of the relationship, he demonstrates grace, forgiveness and commitment. And a human's prayers are part of the process.

And that is amazing.

Probably still shaking from a mixture of fear and relief, Moses asks to see who this God really is:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

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. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. 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. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

God's answer comes in three stages, as it did when he spoke to Moses in Exodus 3 (the passage I looked at in January).

Moses asks to see God's 'glory', which means something like 'visible splendour'. God knows Moses wants to see 'his face', the part of him that best reveals his personality. Moses wants to discover who God is, to go beyond what he has already discovered.

But the Bible makes it clear that (at least in this life) we cannot experience God in all his infinite, pan-dimensional reality and live. The experience would overwhelm our finite minds and bodies, like a computer when it gets fed too much data for it to handle, or a spaceship travelling too close to the sun, we would crash and burn.

Yet God accommodates Moses's request. He agrees to cause 'all my goodness to pass in front of you'. Like the burning bush, God is going to provide Moses with physical evidence of his presence, as much as he can without Moses being destroyed by it.

And he also makes it clear to him that this is not Moses controlling God, as God says, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'. When humans try to play at or control God, it always leads to disaster.

The Revelation

Moses then descends the mountain with the God-written covenant in his hands, only to see the Israelites having a full-on rave around a golden calf. Moses smashes the stone tablets in fury (Moses was a humble man, but there is evidence that he had a temper!) and gives Aaron a dressing down he will never forget.

Following this, Moses dispenses some rough justice on the revellers, followed by God doing the same (we must not forget that God's grace does not mean he will never punish).

There follows more discussions between God and Moses, where once again Moses ‘persuades’ God to remain with the Israelites, making it clear that Moses understands that the thing that makes Israel special is that their God is not far off, but with them.

And so God tells Moses to chisel out two stone tablets like the ones he recently smashed, and to climb Mount Sinai, alone. Which Moses does.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”
Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped.

Exodus 34:5-8

First we are told who is saying this... the Divine Name, YHWH, the name that cannot be said out loud... ‘LORD’ God, the one who takes initiative, the one who cannot be controlled, and just so we get the point, it is mentioned four times in two verses!

Then we get the description:

This God is

- Compassionate
- Gracious
- Slow to anger
- Abounding in love and faithfulness

The words used all describe how God relates to his people. And they are all positive. This is the foundation of who God is. And all of this after his chosen people have ditched him for a calf made of their melted-down earrings.

These words are followed by...

...maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

Exodus 34:7

Again, this is overwhelmingly positive. That he maintains his love to ‘thousands’ almost certainly means ‘a thousand generations’, which is contrasted with his punishment, which is limited to the third and fourth generation. The kind of time frame that a human might live to see is contrasted with God’s infinite perspective.

God is explaining that while his overwhelming tendency is to forgive, he does retain the right to punish. Once again God is asserting his right to self-determination, we can never use the fact that he is loving to twist his arm into doing what we want. Anyone who has had any kind of dealings with children, and some adults, knows that this never ends well.

God behaves freely, but he does not behave randomly. God’s wisdom transcends our wisdom. The way he works will often be beyond our grasp. He demonstrated his love and forgiveness to Moses and the Israelites. He demonstrated it even more in Jesus, the one that Moses prefigured. We have to let God be God. But it is not blind hope.

And now let’s fast forward 14 centuries to the New Testament.

Early in John’s Gospel there is what looks very much like an allusion to Exodus 34:6-7. John is demonstrating how, starting from the Old Testament (or, as he would have called it, The Bible) his readers should understand that Jesus is the fulfilment of its promises.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John 1:14-18

John wants his readers to know that Jesus has done something that the Old Testament law didn't do. John is not being negative about the Old Testament law, he sees it as a gift of God's grace, but Jesus has made God known in ways that Moses could only have dreamed of.

Through Jesus...

‘we have all received grace in place of grace already given’.

And that ‘we’ includes anyone who has accepted Jesus as their Lord.

The same God who heeded Moses' pleas to stay with the rebellious Israelite people has, through Jesus, provided the way for us to be put right with God. And through our relationship with Jesus, enabled by the Holy Spirit, we move as close to seeing God face-to-face as finite people can, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:12 ‘as in a cloudy mirror’.

One day we will see him face to face. For now we know enough. One day we will know God fully, just as we are fully known by God.

Let's grasp that truth, and ask God to make it real in our lives. The life we live on earth is important, and when lived in relationship with our creator/saviour it is a joyful and rewarding journey. But it is not all there is. Death is not the end, it is a continuing of our life in God.

If I die today, I'll be with Jesus. If I don't, he'll be with me today.

This is what Christians have known for over 2,000 years, this is what Jesus' resurrection confirmed. It makes our earthly life more vibrant, gives our sufferings perspective and someone to thank for our joys.