

Chapter 8 Exodus 15-40

Life in the Wilderness

“The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. 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?’” Exodus 33:14-16

How we hear the story dramatically influences the way we understand the story. If we're at home in today's culture and satisfied with its pleasures and provisions then this story will not be very exciting and moving. In fact the whole Exodus-Wilderness story may bore us. But if we're convinced that our own life is a faith journey through the wilderness then we will become attentive to the story's focus on the personal presence and redemptive provision of God. If Christ is our Passover Lamb then the God of Exodus is our God and this is our story, too. We will identify with their fears and their faith, their disobedience and their obedience, and we will be reminded of God's awesome presence and gracious provision.

Exodus is a powerful story for those who follow the Lord Jesus through today's wilderness. Yet our tendency can be to get lost in its ancient detail. We can become either dismissive of it as irrelevant to our faith journey or absorbed by it and dedicated to discovering its alleged hidden secrets and mysteries. Whether we are tempted to ignore this material or allegorize every detail, we do well to let the storyteller move us along so that the thrust of the message is clear.

The theme of Exodus is the proven presence of God. Yahweh is: “I am who I am.” God is real. Everything in the story points resolutely to this compelling and convicting truth, from the bread the Israelites ate to the water they drank, from the Ten Commandments to the Book of the Covenant, and from the Tabernacle to the priestly vestments, all were designed to bring the message home that Yahweh is. They were to know, as we are to know, that God's presence is absolutely real. No part of life can escape his reality. How could it be otherwise? Would we want it otherwise? God's provision for us and protection over us are complete. His guidance and instruction are comprehensive. All of life issues out of God's merciful provision and gracious wisdom.

Although we are free from the burden of the law and the Old Testament sacrificial system, we cannot afford to misread the second half of the book of Exodus. We may be tempted to think of this revelation as a burden, rather than a blessing. Our reaction to the content of these chapters may be influenced more by our culture than by our freedom in Christ. Is it a surprise to us that the Lord God communicated in such definite detail and with such specific statutes? We tend to prefer suggestions to statutes and preferences to precepts. We are inclined to disparage rules and laws and act as if it is a blow to our self-esteem to admit that we are under orders to obey God's commands. It is easy to feel indifferent to Israel's Sabbath laws, the annual feasts, and the detailed description of the Tabernacle, not only because they applied to the Israelites in the wilderness, but because we fail to identify the God of Exodus with the God of Calvary.

But before we dismiss this material too hastily, we should ask ourselves what the wilderness story reveals about Yahweh. What can we learn about the *personal* presence of God and how we should respond to the living Lord who has delivered us from bondage? We may find that we have accommodated our view of God to the cultural virtues of tolerance and flexibility to the point that we easily dismiss this revelation as out of date and irrelevant. If so, we miss the testimony that the God of Exodus has for today's wilderness sojourners. Ironically, some may respond to the story today the same way that the Israelites did. In the wilderness Israel should have been impressed with God's blessing, but instead they felt imposed upon by God's burden. Instead of rejoicing, they were resentful, instead of expressing gratitude, they grumbled. God's initiative was cause for thanksgiving, not reason for intimidation, but the people didn't see it that way.

Tested in the Wilderness

By definition the wilderness is a place of testing. It is where we learn to wait for God's provision, depend upon his protection, rely upon his guidance, and trust in his leadership. Without the wilderness our faith remains untested and weak. The wilderness narrative opens with a simple sentence. "For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water" (15:22). At Marah the people "grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink'" (15:24). After the Lord provided water for them to drink, we read, "There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them" (15:25). The Lord did not test them by taking something away, but by giving them his precepts. They were tested not by what they lacked, but by what they received. "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you" (15:26).

God tested Israel not by thirst or hunger or enemies, but by obedience to his word. Being faithful was not a matter of enduring life's difficulties, but listening to God's Word and responding obediently. Therefore, the true contrast to the Israelites' infamous grumbling is not stoic endurance but active obedience. There is a difference between being a *survivor* and being a *follower of Jesus Christ*. Our goal is not to simply outlast the grief and pain, to weather the storms of life, but to grow in our obedience and dependence upon God. God's testing always involves our response to God's testimony.

I know a brother in Christ who experienced a devastating series of trials. Shortly after coming to our church his wife told him that she had been having an affair for five years. She said she was no longer interested in the Christian Faith and she preferred to practice Eastern mysticism. A few weeks later he broke his leg in four places. This was followed by a painful case of shingles and the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. Meanwhile his promiscuous wife suffered a major mental breakdown. She tried to take her own life and his, by setting a fire in their home. She was hospitalized but refused all medication and counseling. Eventually he moved out of their home, but he continued to pay the mortgage. He lost his job when the company he was working for went bankrupt. After a year of paying all the bills and his wife's refusal to seek treatment, he filed for divorce.

I might have had trouble believing this incredible scenario if I had not followed it each step of the way. What was truly amazing was that as he descended deeper and deeper into the wilderness, he ascended in his relationship with the Lord. Instead of dwelling on each devastating setback, he clung to the promises of God. Weekly worship and Bible study became a lifeline for him. As he said to me, "At times all I can do is remind myself that I'll have an eternity with Christ."

Like Job, both in his suffering and subsequent blessing, this brother experienced a wonderful comeback. He received the support of many Christians, was hired and quickly promoted by a major corporation, and fell in love with a beautiful Christian woman. The blessing and joy he knows today are the result of trusting in the testimony of Christ when he had no worldly reason to believe in God.

Two months into the wilderness experience and once again the Israelites "grumbled against Moses and Aaron." This time it was over food. "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (16:3). As ironic as it may seem, the Lord's test came not in the privation, but the provision. The Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days" (16:4-5). They could have passed God's tests with flying colors by listening and obeying, but the Israelites were willfully stubborn. They couldn't obey the most straightforward directions. Some failed the test by trying to keep the manna overnight and it spoiled. Others failed the test by going out to gather on the seventh day, prompting the Lord to ask Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?" (16:28).

Human nature is prone to turn the tables on the Lord and do what the Israelites did in the wilderness. Instead of obeying God, they put Yahweh to the test. In spite of being delivered from bondage in Egypt and drinking sweet water at Marah, and in spite of eating manna in the morning and quail at night, they grumbled against Moses and tested the Lord. They acted as if the Lord had done nothing for them. What the people said at Rephidim was the same thing they had said at Marah. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?" (17:3). After all of God's blessing, they were still at square one. They were still asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?" When God's people refuse to listen and obey, they invariably test the Lord and turn on their leaders. "What am I to do with these people?" Moses cried out to the Lord. "They are almost ready to stone me?"

We might marvel even more at God's patience with these unbelieving believers if it were not for the fact that they remind us of ourselves. By meeting their physical needs and protecting them from their enemies, God proved himself faithful in spite of their faithlessness. Whether it was Moses holding high the staff of God as the battle raged with the Amalekites, or Moses using the staff to strike the rock to release fresh drinking water, God chose means of intervention that

deliberately proved his presence. Moses built an altar after the victory over the Amalekites and called it "The Lord is my Banner" (17:15), to focus on what Yahweh was seeking to impress upon the people.

We cannot hear the story of Israel in the wilderness without thinking of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt 1-11). But instead of God testing the Israelites for their obedience, Satan tempted Jesus for his destruction. Instead of divine intervention providing for physical needs, it was human intercession deprived of physical needs. Jesus knew that the real test was not the absence of bread but obedience to the Word of God. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Without manna in the wilderness and mountain top victories, Jesus remained faithful, but the Israelites, with all those benefits, were faithless. The Israelites put the Lord to the test, but Jesus resisted, saying, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Mt 4:7). The Israelites bowed before a golden calf, an idol of their own making, but Jesus refused to bow before Satan, the Prince of this world, saying, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Mt 4:9). The contrast between Jesus and Israel in the wilderness is for our benefit. We hear the story of Israel as a warning and the story of Jesus as a witness. Together, they show us how not to live in the wilderness but also how to live in the wilderness.

Freedom in the Wilderness

Three months into their wilderness journey Israel camped in front of Mount Sinai, the very place where God had revealed himself to Moses. God wanted Israel to experience what Moses had experienced, because God wanted the world to know him through the testimony of Israel. God gave his message through Moses, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5-6). Once again God sought to impress the people with his unmistakable, undeniable presence. The advent of God on Mount Sinai was designed to call forth from the people a collective "Here I am!" And it did, at least initially. "The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said'" (19:8). God got Moses' attention with a burning bush. He got Israel's attention with a burning mountain. Moses had to take off his shoes because he was walking on holy ground. The people of Israel had to be kept back from Mount Sinai, "because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently..." (19:18). How different was this advent on the mountain from the advent in the manger! At Sinai the people were warned away from the presence of the Lord, but at Bethlehem the shepherds ran to see the Christ child. Two very different signs: a violently quaking mountain and "a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12), but make no mistake, the same Lord.

We often ignore the awesome advent of God at Sinai when we think of the ten commandments, but the majesty and purity of the Lord God provide the true context for their revelation. We will never reduce the ten commandments to mere rules and moralistic platitudes if we have grasped even a fraction of the truth about the fear-invoking, faith-fulfilling God who is. God addressed the people directly, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." The Lord God, whose holy presence at Sinai was so powerful that it threatened

to destroy anyone who got too close, is none other than their (and our) Savior and Liberator. The "Ten words" spoken by God hold the key to experiencing true freedom, and resonate with the promise of Jesus, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32). The purpose of each negation is a resounding affirmation.

Eugene summarizes the value of the Ten Commandments for community:

“The Ten Words establish the conditions necessary for a free, loving, and just community of God’s people to develop and flourish. The three adjectives—free, loving, just—are basic to community. Community is intricate and complex. It consists of many people of various moods, ideas, needs, experiences, gifts and injuries, desires and disappointments, blessings and losses, intelligence and stupidity, living in proximity and in respect for one another, and believingly in worship of God. It is not easy and it is not simple. The conditions, established by the Ten Words, at least make it possible. None of the conditions is onerous. All are both necessary and non-negotiable” (Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 252).

Without God’s benchmark commandments it would be impossible to understand grace and compassion as *divine* attributes. True grace works with the law of God, by respecting, abiding, and obeying the law, but *secular* grace works against the law by equivocating, compromising and disobeying the law. It is not the law that needs grace but we who break the law. Those who disqualify the law in the name of grace or equate compassion with compromise forfeit the moral order that is so essential for community. Grace and mercy are best understood in the context of definite sin, genuine guilt, real repentance and true forgiveness. Apart from God’s concrete, necessary, and enduring commands, grace is just another way of excusing sinful human weakness. But true grace accepts the commands of God with complete seriousness.

To have no other gods before Yahweh "sets forth an expectation of absolute priority" (John Durham, *Exodus*, Word, 1987, p.284). Nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39). To be free from idols is to allow nothing in all of creation, real or imagined to come between God and us. Nothing can represent or substitute for Yahweh: no possession nor person, no activity nor ideology, no dream nor devotion, no cause nor complex, no fear nor fantasy, no gift nor grief, no pleasure nor pain.

The freedom of the third command is to honor, bless, celebrate, proclaim, and represent the name of God truthfully, authentically, and worshipfully. The concern of the third command is not primarily verbal, but relational, ethical, spiritual and theological. The apostle Paul expressed this freedom well when he said, "whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17). The freedom of the fourth command is the freedom to fulfill the Sabbath. One day in seven we were meant to stop our efforts, cease our daily routines, and find our rest in God our Maker and Redeemer. The danger is that many would make this one day in seven optional and begin to look upon the Sabbath as a day off to be used however they like. To remove the true Sabbath is to remove the believer's Independence Day; it is to rob the believer of Resurrection Sunday. God intended for us to know his peace and rest not only in our hearts but in our weekly routine. The people of God

need to "stop" once a week as a community, to worship God and be encouraged by Him. Together we need to hear our Lord say, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4). We deserve to hear the word of Jesus, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (Jn 14:27).

The freedom to love and worship God is emphasized in the first four commandments and the freedom to honor our parents, protect human life, remain faithful in marriage, respect other people's property, speak the truth in love, and purify our attitude toward our neighbor is the focus of the last six commands. The commandments insist on an inseparable bond between how we relate to God and how we relate to one another. That is why Jesus summed up the Law by saying, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mk 12:29-31).

From the beginning, the Law was not meant to impose a burden but offer a blessing. This is how the people of God then and now were meant to live in the wilderness. At the conclusion of Yahweh's address, "when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear" (20:18). This awesome display of God's majesty framed and centered the revelation of these life-shaping commands. Everything in them issues out of the character of God. Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning" (20:20). Once again God's testing comes in the form of a blessing, not a burden. It is his precepts and provisions, rather than the world's principles and privations that provide the basis for God's testing of his people.

Worship in the Wilderness

Ultimately, God was to make his presence known in the Incarnation. The story moves toward this climatic truth: "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us (or tabernacled 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" (Jn 1:14). But in the meantime God's story emphasizes his presence in every aspect of life. God made himself real in everything from the daily provision of manna to the precepts governing Hebrew servants and personal injury accidents. Property disputes and personal culpability were decided according to God's will. The Lord God let it be known that he sided with the alien, "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt" (22:21). He made his presence felt on behalf of the widow and orphan, "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless" (22:22-24). The range of specific issues covered by God's precepts, laws and statutes was both concrete and comprehensive.

Wherever they turned and whatever they experienced, the Israelites in the wilderness faced the presence of God. The message comes through time and again, Yahweh is. But one concern transcended all other concerns and proved to be the center of God's attention and the focus of

Israel's life together. Worship was God's overriding concern. The sheer volume of detailed instruction on how to make the ark of the Testimony, the Table for the bread of the Presence, the Seven-branched Lampstand, and the Tabernacle emphasizes the invisible realities of salvation, forgiveness, and holiness. The Israelites were to live a life of obedience in the wilderness, but their lives were never limited to the wilderness. The Most Holy Place, the Altar of Burnt Offering, the Special Formula Incense, and the Priestly Garments pointed beyond ethical prescriptions to the theological reality and human necessity of God's presence. As Moses said, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us..." (33:15).

Through "a series of set-apart places, set-apart objects and set-apart acts" God communicated the reality of his presence (Durham, p.501). God intended ethics and spirituality to merge in the wilderness. Worship and work were to be God-centered. The Sabbath rest set the weekly rhythm and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of Ingathering set the rhythm for the year. Livelihood and liturgy were bound together, reminding the people of God's gracious provision for their physical strength and spiritual redemption.

The storyteller slows the pace of the story down by elaborating on God's specific instructions for worship. We're told exactly how everything is to be made and then we're told exactly how they were made. It is one of those rare times in the story when it feels like the storyteller followed the old adage, "First I'm going to tell you what I'm going to say, then I'm going to say it, then I'm going to tell you what I said."

Nothing about Israel's worship of Yahweh was left to invention and speculation. Creativity was not measured in novelty and innovation, but in superior craftsmanship. The architect of worship, from start to finish was God. Bezalel, from the tribe of Judah, along with Oholiab, his assistant, were called to make what God had commanded. In effect God was the composer and they were the musicians. God designed the Tabernacle and its furniture, selected the materials to be used, and equipped the artisans to build according to his exact specifications. God said of Bezalel, "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship" (31:3-5).

Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God for the purpose of producing the symbols and media through which Israel would worship Yahweh. These exquisitely crafted material objects were not treasured for their opulence or beauty, but for what they symbolized. The Ark of Testimony was the most important symbol of God's presence. Although it was lined and covered with pure gold, and it was not to be touched by human hands but moved by specially made poles, it was but a box. And not a very big box at that. It measured three feet, six and a half inches long and two feet, two and a quarter inches wide and high. Everything else, from the Table of the Bread of Presence to the Altar of the Burnt Offering, was placed in reference to the Ark of the Covenant. Its lid was called the atonement cover and its contents included a copy of the commandments. It signified the Word and Sacrament of God. From its name, shape, and contents, the Ark of Testimony symbolized Yahweh's presence and pointed to the divine work of redemption and revelation necessary for the salvation of God's people. It was never thought of as a substitute for

the invisible reality of God nor as an object of worship and devotion. Its material value makes us think of the Gospel truth memorialized by Jesus, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21), but its shape and name makes us think of other famous containers, like Noah's ark, Moses' basket (ark), and the apostle's clay vessel. At the center of Israel's worship life, in the Most Holy Place, the Ark was not a sacred relic, but a symbol of the Presence of God. The Ark of Testimony pointed away from idolatry to the invisible reality of the God who is. What the apostle Paul admonished, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things," still holds true for worship in the wilderness (Col 3:3).

Spirit-filled Bezalel parallels today's Spirit-filled believer. True worship of Yahweh remains the goal and the spiritual realities of humility and forgiveness, symbolized in the Tabernacle and its furniture, are at the heart of our worship. Instead of a copy of the commandments in the Ark of the Covenant, the word of Christ dwells in "God's chosen people," who are "holy and dearly loved" (Col 3:12,16). As Bezalel and his colleagues worked in the Spirit, we live in the Spirit. When we hear Christians share their testimony of how God in Christ has worked in their lives, we can recall the Ark of the Testimony. The idolatry resistant ark and the saved by grace alone believer testify to the living reality of God, whose atoning sacrifice and Word of redemption center all true worship.

Israel's immediate response to the advent of Yahweh at Sinai was to affirm with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do" (24:3). But when Moses "was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us'" (32:1). The inexcusable and inexplicable incident of the golden calf interrupts the implementation of God's directions for worship. Before Moses had a chance to deliver the ten commandments and construct Israel's worship center, the people rushed to create their own emotional and spiritual center. The story does not imply that the people under Aaron's leadership wished to forsake Yahweh. Their response to the idol cast in the shape of a calf can be translated, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (32:4). And "when Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord'" (32:4-5). "The calf represented Yahweh on *their* terms" (Durham, p.422, emphasis his).

Every golden-calf worshipping Israelite sincerely intended to worship Yahweh. They didn't feel they were copying Egyptian idolatry or compromising the faith. They were simply using cultural traditions to express themselves to God. This is sobering, because like the Israelites, we may be tempted to substitute our own religious agenda for true worship. For a variety of reasons we may feel a void or emptiness, a lack of energy or leadership, and instead of waiting on God, we rush to implement our own religious agenda. Aaron's "festival to the Lord" generated considerable excitement and enthusiasm, but it quickly degenerated into self-indulgence.

The golden-calf incident provoked a dialogue between the Lord and Moses that went back and forth. First it was the Lord who was angry, "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" (32:10). Moses appealed for God's mercy, "O Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and mighty hand? ...Turn from your fierce

anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...' (32:11-13). But after Moses descended the mountain, carrying the two tablets of testimony, and he heard the people shouting and saw the golden calf and the people dancing "his anger burned" (32:19). He threw the tablets down, smashing them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. Then he burned and pulverized the idol. He confronted Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" (32:21).

Aaron's lame excuse is a reminder to all those in leadership that there is never any excuse for caving in to popular pressure. Disobedience has no justification. Aaron said to Moses, "You know how prone these people are to evil," but if he had believed that, he should have been prepared to resist their begging and insist on waiting for God's direction. As a result of Aaron's weakness and the people's disobedience the entire company of Israelites was jeopardized. "Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies" (32:25). If they didn't destroy themselves their enemies would have done it for them. This called for extreme measures and Moses took them. The Levites went throughout the camp "from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor" (32:27). At the end of that tragic day three thousand of the people had died (32:28). Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (32:31-32). The dialogue began with the Lord ready to wipe out all the people and start over with Moses, but it ends with Moses pleading for their forgiveness and offering to lay down his own life. Of course the Lord had the final word, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you" (32:34).

Moses and Aaron

We observe two different leaders when we compare Aaron and Moses. The story contrasts Aaron's weakness and defensiveness with Moses' strength and devotion. Aaron blamed the people for their evil ways, but Moses pled for their forgiveness. "Aaron exonerated himself from all active involvement; Moses put his own life on the line for Israel's sake" (Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p.570). Aaron listened to the people, Moses listened to God. Aaron led the people into disobedience, Moses led the Levites into radical obedience. Aaron capitulated, but Moses contended. Such a definite contrast makes it ironic that Aaron should become the High Priest. It was Aaron, not Moses, who wore the golden ephod with the gemstones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. He wore the beautifully crafted breastpiece, the finely embroidered linen sash and the turban adorned with the sacred diadem made out of pure gold and inscribed with the words, "Holy to the Lord" (39:30). Aaron's priestly vestments were designed to symbolize the purity, light, holiness and glory of the presence of God, but the man himself reminds us of our fallen, sinful human nature. Aaron didn't deserve to represent Israel before the presence of God in the Most Holy Place, but the fact that he did made perfect theological sense. Aaron embodied the need of God's people for atonement; Moses embodied the hope of God's people for communion with God.

The importance of Moses in the story sends a powerful message that the law and everything pertaining to it will be superseded by a personal relationship with God (Jer 31:33). Aaron was outwardly clothed with the symbols of God's presence, but Moses possessed the driving passion for God's presence. "If I have found favor in your eyes, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people" (33:13). It was his heart's desire that he might know God in the depth of his being. "Now show me your glory," was the affirmation and confirmation sought by Moses. And the Lord made himself known to Moses up to the limits of what Moses could bear. Because the Lord said, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (33:20). The only symbol that Moses had of the presence of God was his shepherd's staff, the staff of God, but that alone spoke of an authority that outranked Aaron.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, "he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord" (34:29). The radiance of the glory of God reflected in the face of Moses, and made Aaron and the Israelites "afraid to come near him" (34:30). They knew immediately that this glory was not of Moses or of any material object, but of God. We know that none of the Tabernacle items designed by God and skillfully crafted by Bezalel and his colleagues could hold a candle to the radiance of God's glory reflected in the face of Moses. The glory of the tabernacle and the priestly vestments, while important, was tied to the law, but the glory unconsciously expressed in the face of Moses was tied to his personal experience of the presence of God.

The apostle Paul contrasted the ministry of the law with the ministry of the Spirit. He asked, "if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" (2 Cor 3:7-8). From Paul's vantage point, Moses clearly represented the law, but within the story of Exodus itself, the contrast between Aaron and Moses points forward to the ministry of the Spirit of Christ. Moses' experience of the burning bush was meant to parallel Israel's experience of the burning mountain, and Moses' experience of being with God was meant to parallel our experience of being in Christ. Salvation history links Moses on Mount Sinai with Moses on the mount of Transfiguration. Who better than Moses to witness the glory of the presence of God in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior? "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt 17:1-3).