

# “Exodus”

## Fall Series 1

### Lesson 6

### “Exodus 33”

**Objective:** To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

**Materials:** The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

#### Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

From what we find in 32:1-3 it is clear that the sin of the golden calf stands as the background for this chapter.<sup>1</sup> Moses is told that he and the people are to leave the place (the place where the sin was committed) and to go to the land which God had sworn to give to Abraham, Issac and Jacob. Sarna indicates that the punitive decree of 32:10 was cancelled because of the oaths given to the patriarchs (32:13), and not because of the merits of the people themselves. In this verse *YHWH* refers to “the people” and does not refer to them as “your people” as He had at 32:7.<sup>2</sup> In this though the anger of God seems to have subsided, it is clear that it is not because of any merit seen in the people, it is because God remembers and dwells on the promises He had made previously. There are however, indications of changes in the relationship between *YHWH* and the people.

At 32:2, God indicates that He will send an “angel” in the Hebrew text (מַלְאֲכִי - *malach* - Hebrew - τὸν ἄγγελόν μου - Greek - *ton angelon mou* - the angel of me) before them. The promise of 23:20-33 and 32:34 is repeated here, with the ominous change of

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in The Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: 1976), pp. 588-592.

<sup>2</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 210-211.

“my angel” to “the angel.”<sup>3</sup> God’s perceptions and interactions with the people appear to have changed here. The promise given here indicates that God still intends to drive out the nations living in the land that He had promised to Israel, but there appears to be a stepping back in some way from personal contact with the people, this is perhaps a change that is indicated in the manner of talking about the angel that will go before the people. The change in response indicates that the people were still not worthy of inheriting the Land on their own merits. Despite all of the pleas from Moses, the executions of sinners by the Levites, and the plague, the residue of sin had only been diminished, but was not eliminated.<sup>4</sup> The relationship is still strained between God and the people.

God indicates in 33:3 that the reason He would not go up with the people was because the people are “stiff-necked” people. There is always a danger that the people will sin again and incur the wrath of God and so He cannot stay in their midst, because it is not safe for the people. There are two aspects of divine

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<sup>3</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah publications Ltd., 2014), pp. 501-502.

displeasure included here: one is that God would not accompany them, and the other was that the “angel” would only be with them until they occupied the land (Ramban).<sup>5</sup> Some have indicated that what is being pointed out here represents the fact that there are two different kinds of angels, only one of which is a form of the divine presence. Such speculation goes beyond what is here in the text.<sup>6</sup> There is however a distancing of God in some way from the people being indicated here.

There is not any indication that this change in any way effects the cloud and the pillar of fire which had guided the people earlier though.<sup>7</sup> God’s absence from close proximity to the people was intended to be an act of mercy. It was designed to be a preventative measure that was intended to avert what would inevitably occur; another episode like the golden calf would almost certainly mean the destruction of Israel.<sup>8</sup> Being “stiff-necked” means that the people are prone to evil as Aaron had said previously and the presence of God therefore represents a threat

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 502.

<sup>6</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 588.

<sup>7</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 588.

<sup>8</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 211.

to the continued existence of the people. God would “consume” (כָּלָה - *calah*) them; this is the same word that was used at 32:10 of the threat that God made against Israel when God informed Moses of the making and worship of the golden calf.

The reaction of the people at 33:4, after hearing the “harsh” words of God was to mourn and for no one to put on any ornaments. The decision of God not to go up with the people has a shattering effect on the people and sends them into mourning. It was after all for want of the mediating representation of God’s immanence that the whole incident with the golden calf started in the first place. Sarna believes that verses 4 and 5 are inverted and should be reversed since the command to take off the ornaments comes after the people have already put them off. Scherman interprets these verses in a different way leaving the current order and interpreting the action of the people in putting off their ornaments as insufficient and then further instructions coming later from God. These further instructions would include even the garments that they had been wearing when the blood of the covenant sprinkled on them.<sup>9</sup> They too were to be removed,

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<sup>9</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 211.

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because they were sacred due to the blood and therefore represented in some way God's favor.

Some have connected the removing of the ornaments with them being removed in order to construct the ark of the covenant. This assumption goes beyond anything to be found in the text here. It appears that the ornaments were removed, as the text states, as a sign of the people's mourning for what they had just been told. This is a difficult text and the Old Greek Translation (The Septuagint) resolves these difficulties by shortening the text here and excluding any mention of removing ornaments in verse 4. Modern scholars have reconciled the matters here by seeing two variants of the same story. Whatever the technical difficulties may be in interpreting this text, as we now have it, the meaning appears to be clear: the narrative demonstrates a change of heart on the part of Israel. They are repenting, turning away, from their previous actions and behavior. That is the point of the text here even if the details might be a little fuzzier than we would like. At 33:6 we are informed that the stripping of the ornaments was not

a temporary phenomenon, but was something that continued from Mount Horeb onwards.<sup>10</sup>

Some commentators have found 33:7-11 to have no obvious connection with either what precedes it, or what follows it. To them its content appears to interrupt the theme of God's denying Israel His accompanying presence as they proceed on their journey. The style of the writing here is markedly different from what is before it and what is after it. Expositors have found it difficult to explain the tent which is described as the meeting place outside the camp in these verses. The difficulty arises because this "tent" is described as "the tent" (הַאֹהֶל - *haohel*) and thus is explicitly identified as "the tent of meeting." In the timeline of Exodus, this tent had not yet been erected (40:16ff.). Another issue is that this tent does not fit the description of "the tent of meeting" that we have later. This tent also has a different function and location (cf. Numbers 3:1ff.).<sup>11</sup>

The normal way of dealing with this interpretive difficulty was by constructing a theory that this tent was Moses' own private tent. This is the solution found in the Old Greek

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<sup>10</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 589.

<sup>11</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, pp. 589-590.

Translation (The Septuagint) and other Jewish commentators.<sup>12</sup>

This is the interpretation advocated by Scherman, who reasons that since the people had fallen from their lofty spiritual perch and God had announced that He would not reside with them Moses left the camp and set up his tent in isolation from the sinners.<sup>13</sup> There is no mention of this tent housing The Ark of the Covenant. Modern scholars have simply seen this account as an insertion of the text that is merely the fragment of an old tradition. This suggestion by modern scholars is not helpful in determining the meaning of this passage here. The function here is to demonstrate the role of Moses as mediator for the people. In terms of topical sequence verses 7-11 serve as a connection between what precedes and what follows by combining Moses, God, and the mourning people within one activity.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, the people do not simply mourn (verse 4), they also respond with reverent behavior - they rise and worship (verse 10). This section then witnesses to the obedient and worshipful behavior over an extended period of time of the

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<sup>12</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 590.

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 503.

<sup>14</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, pp. 591-592.



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people. This serves as actions representing a change of heart, a repentance on the part of the people. This behavior then stands as the foundational premise giving Moses warrant to intercede once again on behalf of the people (verse 12). There is much going on here. Later on putting something outside the camp will carry a negative connotation, but here outside the camp is seen as more pure than inside the camp because of the sinfulness of the people in their act of idolatry. Moses took his tent outside the camp because the people had just proven themselves unfit for God to dwell in their midst.<sup>15</sup> The presence of God was dangerous to the people, and His continued presence in the midst of the people represented a constant danger. Moses' actions represent, like God's actions an act of protecting the people by moving away from their presence and therefore away from the chance of destroying them. This account then aligns perfectly with what God has decreed previously will be the new standard of contact with the people.

We are told that Moses would return to the camp after spending time consulting with *YHWH* in the tent. We are told that

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<sup>15</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 592.

he would do this after speaking in a very intimate way with God as a “friend.” The assistant of Moses, Joshua, is described in verse 11 as a “young” (νέος - *neos*) man in the Old Greek translation. In the Hebrew text he is merely referred to as the “chief assistant” (שָׂרָת - *sharath*) of Moses. There is some dispute regarding what the age of Joshua would have been in the Jewish traditions, but the options are that he was either 56, or 42 years old. What might be happening here is something that is common in Hebrew, which is for the master to be referred to as a man and his subordinate to be seen as a young man, or a boy.<sup>16</sup> That would mean that we are being informed of the subordinate role of Joshua to Moses. Moses had duties that meant that he could not stay in the tent constantly, but the tent was never left unattended, Joshua did not depart from the tent. The tent was never left without an honor guard. *YHWH* watches over His people, and just so, His people watch over the shrine dedicated to Him.<sup>17</sup>

At 32:12, we have the account of Moses beginning to intercede for the people once again. Childs says, “The broad lines

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<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 504.

<sup>17</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), p. 432.

of the dialogue which follows between God and Moses are basically clear, but many details of the passage remain difficult and perplexing.”<sup>18</sup> The conversation begins by Moses reminding *YHWH* of what He had previously told him. It appears that Moses is perplexed by his circumstances, hence perhaps this explains in some sense the difficult and perplexing aspects of this account. The audience stands in the same position as Moses, perplexed. Moses is confused because he does not know the “ways” of God. In verse 13, Moses pleads with God for Him to reveal His ways to him. Moses says that this will demonstrate to him that he has truly found favor in His sight. Moses also takes the opportunity to remind God that Israel is His people.

At 32:14 we have the beginning of the response of God to Moses. He indicates that His “face,” or “presence” (פָּנָי - *panay*) would go with “you,” with Moses singular. God is promising to go with Moses in a very close and relational way. God also promises Moses that He will give him “rest” (הַנְּחִיחֵנִי - *hanichothy*). This verse literally said that God would “cause Moses to rest.” “To give rest” in the Hebrew Scriptures is often used in connection to

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<sup>18</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 593.

possession of the promised land (Deuteronomy 3:20; 12:10, etc.).

The usage of the singular pronoun here may point in another direction for the meaning in this text. The promise of God here remains focused on Moses personally. “He is offered the comfort of God.”<sup>19</sup> This is something uniquely offered to Moses as the close friend of God.

In 33:15-16 Moses continues to challenge God for a response as a part of the bargaining process. In the challenges Moses expresses his understanding that he believes that the survival of the people, the hope of the people rests in *YHWH's* presence being with them. The close presence of *YHWH* is critical for the survival of the people. It would be better for the people not to go up from there if *YHWH*, if His presence did not go with them.<sup>20</sup> Another part of the concern that Moses has, is that he recognizes that it is critical that the people recognize that he (Moses) has found favor in the eyes of *YHWH* and once again we have concern expressed with regard to what people outside of Israel think. He expresses that in the question of “how shall it be known” not only that Moses, but also that “your people” have

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<sup>19</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 594.

<sup>20</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 434.

found favor in your sight. Israel is to be “distinct” from every people on the face of the earth. They are to be people dedicated to God as is demonstrated by the “presence” of *YHWH*.

At 33:17 we have the beginning of *YHWH*'s response to Moses. He begins by telling him that He will do the very thing that he has asked, because he has found favor in His sight and *YHWH* knows him by name: What a powerful and relational response from God. The creator of the universe, the sovereign God over all things, knows him by his name. Cassuto, says, “Here Scripture seeks to teach us how meritorious is the one who pleads for the good of others.”<sup>21</sup> Moses has found favor in the sight of God because of his selfless concern for other. In this Moses emulates the nature of God. This nature is seen most fully in Jesus Christ, but even here we see through the commendation of Moses that this is something that God values and encourages. Moses continues to grapple with God seeking the full restoration of the original covenant between God and the people. The way is now opened up for a formal restoration of the renewal of the covenant.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 435.

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 595.

At 33:18 Moses then makes another request of *YHWH*, he asks to see the “glory” (כְּבוֹד - *cavod*) of God. This word is one of the seminal terms of biblical theology. This is a term that often signifies God’s self-manifestation, some outward, visible sign of His essential presence. At Mount Sinai, the “presence” the כְּבוֹד - *cavod* of *YHWH* appeared as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain (24:17). Moses is requesting a glimpse of the Divine Presence. It may be pointed out that in every other instance of a visible כְּבוֹד - *cavod* in the Torah there are three characteristic features: 1. It is a mass experience; 2. the כְּבוֹד - *cavod* is distant from the observers; 3. God initiates the manifestation and freely chooses the time and the place of the manifestation. What Moses is pleading for here is an individual experience, one that is of him choosing the time and the place.<sup>23</sup> This is an unprecedented request.

*YHWH* answers by saying that He will make his “goodness” (טוֹב - *tov*) pass before Moses. In ancient Near Eastern treaties and in several biblical texts the term (טוֹב - *tov*) is used as a technical legal term of covenantal friendship; that is friendship

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<sup>23</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, pp. 213-214.

that is established by the conclusion of a pact. In light of this meaning, it is highly possible that the present verse contains an intimation of the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel.<sup>24</sup> *YHWH* also indicates that He will proclaim before him the “The Name.” This means more than merely a pronouncing of the sounds, it also means a revelation of the attributes to which it eludes.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the usage that we find here in verse 19 is unique in Scripture and without an exact parallel elsewhere, but the concern is clearly meant to define God’s revelation in terms of activity toward Israel; and through the intervention of Moses.<sup>26</sup>

*YHWH* makes a tremendous statement of His sovereignty in saying that He will be gracious, and will show “mercy” (רחם - *raham*) to whom He will show “mercy” (רחם - *raham*). He will show His mercy at His discretion and it is impossible for anyone to know when, or if, *YHWH* will act in mercy. If God were to constantly allow mercy to prevail, in every instance, over justice then God could not be a righteous judge and wickedness would

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<sup>24</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 436.

<sup>26</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 596.

certainly prevail because of the guaranteed assurance of forgiveness.<sup>27</sup>

*YHWH* told Moses that he could not see His face and live in verse 20. This is more than just about seeing with the eyes, it is about knowing the ways of God. God is not predictable to us in the sense that we as human beings can comprehend His ways. To see the face, to understand the ways of God, is beyond the power of man's comprehension throughout the days of his life upon the earth. The commentators who posit the view that these words are a reference to the belief that whoever sees God dies, or to the doctrine that after death a person may see God, are reading into the text here, according to Cassuto.<sup>28</sup> In the same way that Israel had experienced the thunder and lightening on the mountain before the giving of the ten commandments. Now Moses, as the mediator of the restored covenant, once again has an encounter with the majesty of God before hearing his will and receiving it on the tablets of the law. In summation, this final section of chapter 33 serves as the climax for the intercession of Moses for the

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<sup>27</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 436.

<sup>28</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 436.



restoration of the covenant that will come in the chapter that follows.<sup>29</sup>

Cassuto says that the common interpretive problem encountered by commentators, of this passage, is that they fail to recognize the figurative nature of the expressions that are being used here. His interpretation is that to describe the fact that no human being will be able to discern *YHWH's* essential nature, but only some of His attributes.<sup>30</sup> Scherman disagrees with Cassuto and instead takes the text at its plain sense: he says that a human being can no more survive a direct confrontation with the “glory” of God than can a person’s eyesight remain intact if a person stares at the sun. Whatever the exact meaning here, in order to save Moses from harm *YHWH* places him in a cave, a cleft in the rock and covers him there with His hand. He did that to shield him from the brilliance that would have been more than he could bear.<sup>31</sup> Sarna interprets this passage as related to the fact that:

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<sup>29</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 597.

<sup>30</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 437.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 507.


“No human being can ever penetrate the ultimate mystery of God’s Being.”<sup>32</sup>

This chapter shows us this very relational encounter with *YHWH*. Moses has this very close, and what we might term as personal, encounter with God. The concern of Moses for the people is remarkable and God seeks to reward this selflessness on the part of Moses by the granting of mercy for the people because He chooses to exercise mercy. God lives up to His unpredictable nature and despite the Great Sin of Israel chooses to bless them because of His listening to one man who was willing to sacrifice his life for a sinful and undeserving people. This is one of the reasons that we continually pray, because God might choose to help. In this account Moses prefigures what Jesus would do in conveying the sacrificial nature of God in order to bring mercy to those who were guilty and had no hope. God is the bringer of hope in the midst of despair.

This passage challenges us with the wild and unpredictable nature of *YHWH*; at least from our perspective, but it encourages us in giving us hope as we see God time and time again giving

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<sup>32</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 215.



undeserved mercy to sinful and rebellious people. This is a passage of Scripture that should call all of us to being intercessors for others and to be penitent and worshipful in our attitudes and actions toward God. We must always recognize that the ways of God are mysterious to us, beyond our comprehension, and that God balances, in some way, justice and mercy to bring about the greatest good for those that love Him.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Romans 8:28 **We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.** CEB.

# Synopsis

In the Book of Exodus the sin of the golden calf looms large on the horizon and in this chapter we encounter the ongoing repercussions of that “great sin.” One of those repercussions is that despite great mercy from God, intercession from Moses, the promises to the patriarchs, and the killing of three-thousand of those who sinned by the Levites, there are still consequences for the sin of the people. *YHWH* has withdrawn His close presence from the people and will no longer travel in close proximity to them as they continue onto the promised land. God separates Himself from the people because of their propensity to sin (they are stiff-necked). There is danger that He will consume the people if He remains close to them.

The people respond to these words from God by mourning, an act of contrition, of repentance, by removing their ornaments and then by rising and bowing down to worship when *YHWH* meets with Moses at the tent outside the camp. Moses continues to intercede for the people with God and seek the restoration of the original covenant with the people and the return of the promise of the presence of *YHWH* into the midst of the people. It

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is perhaps in the contrition of the people that Moses finds the grounds for continuing to intercede with God on behalf of the people. He does not give up, and he seeks to understand God more fully and completely in the midst of all his negotiations.

Moses seeks to see the “glory” of *YHWH* and to understand the mystery of His ways more fully. God promises to show Moses His “goodness” and even in this demonstration of the close relationship between Moses and *YHWH* there is still an element of protection provided for Moses (God covers him with His hand). God does reveal to Moses elements of His mercy by indicating that He will show mercy to whomever He chooses to show mercy. God is mysterious to human beings and though He reveals some of Himself it only heightens the mystery in a sense, but also challenges us to trust Him and to trust in His goodness.

# Questions

1. How do you decide if a person is trustworthy or not trustworthy?
2. Why do you think God chooses to bless Israel because of His promises to the patriarchs?
3. Why do you think Moses seeks the presence of God to travel with the people rather than His representative, the angel?
4. How do you see God trying to protect the people by maintaining a distance from them?
5. What do you think it means for a people to be described as “stiff-necked?”
6. What are some ways that people can express mourning or repentance?
7. Do you think it is a good thing to mourn and repent? Why, or why not?
8. When someone mourns, or repents what message do you think they are sending to others?
9. Why do you think Moses would want to meet with God outside the camp?
10. As you read verses 10-11 and see their reverence what thoughts come to your mind in regarding to the nature of the people of Israel?
11. What is striking to you about the negotiations of Moses with God, for the people?
12. Why do you think Moses expresses the desire to know the ways of God?

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13. Why do you think Moses values the presence of God so much?
  14. What do you think it means for Moses to seek to see the “glory” of God?
  15. How do you see God balancing justice and mercy?
  16. What do you think we can learn about the nature of God from this chapter?
  17. What are some ways that your understanding of this chapter might change the way you live your life?
  18. As you have understood the message of this chapter, how might this challenge you in the way you pray prayers of intercession for others?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that God seeks the good of people even when He separates Himself from people. His separation is not like it normally is with people separating themselves from other. In God's separation is the expression of care and concern for others. He is not doing it because He cannot stand the sight of the people, but out of deep concern and care for them. In truth, we are all stiff-necked people and in danger of inciting the wrath of God. How does understanding this about God challenge your views of God?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words trying to explain that which is beyond our ability to comprehend enough about His motives so that we can trust Him. We trust all sorts of things that we do not understand every day. We ride in airplanes that most of us do not fully understand, we take medications the actions of we do not fully understand. God challenges us to trust Him despite the fact that we are not capable of fully understanding Him, or His ways. What is the most challenging thing that you do not understand about God?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

If we can come to trust in God despite not having full understanding then life can change for us dramatically. We can leave to God things that are in His hands alone. Our anxiety about things that are in His hands can fall away and we can concentrate instead on pursuing what we do know and understand about Him. Life can have purpose and direction as we participate with God in His plan of redemption, healing, and love of His creation. What are some ways that you seek to participate each day in God's redemption, healing and love of this world?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

We are called upon to trust God and not suspect that He is holding out on us, manipulating us, or has some hidden agenda. God has told us what His agenda is, and He has made this most plain in Jesus. What does it look like for you to follow Jesus today?