

## Ultimate Favor



Gary Wilkerson September 12, 2016

The word “favor” is used often in the church today. Pastors across America promise people that God is going to favor them. Sadly, what they mean by favor is limited to possessions, positions and acquisitions—better homes, cars and jobs, a happier family and a growing income. I do believe God favors his people this way. But there’s a danger when we live for this kind of favor at the risk of losing something much higher. We short-change ourselves when we live for anything but “Ultimate Favor.” Let me explain.

Everyone knows about the biblical concept of a Promised Land. It’s the arrival place for any people who seek freedom, relief from bondage and the joy of a blessed life. The original Promised Land was a gift that God gave to ancient Israel—a literal place called Canaan, a fertile land bursting with oversized fruits and flowing rivers. It was the stuff of dreams for the Israelites, a people who’d been beaten down and exiled for generations. Yet when they arrived at Canaan’s border—a land of plenty in every sense—God made an unusual statement to Moses: “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 33:3).

This may sound harsh, but when it’s put into context, we see it’s anything but harsh. God had freed Israel from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Now, on the cusp of their entry to the Promised Land, God made this surprising declaration: “I will not go with you.”

He explains why in the next phrase: “For you are a stiff-necked people.” Even after all the miraculous things God did for the Israelites, they complained every time they faced a new hardship. Their experiences—and the miracles he performed for them—never translated into faith. Instead, the people attacked his character. They accused God of delivering them just to see them die in the desert. Every time Moses turned around they were threatening to reject God and abandon his leading.

But Moses’ faith was different. He knew the goodness of God, as demonstrated in all his supernatural works for Israel. In fact, the Lord’s favor toward his people seemed bottomless, never ending, unlimited. No matter what obstacle they faced or how impossible it seemed, God brought them through every time.

Moses marveled at the character of a God who mercifully performed all these things on their behalf. So when the Lord said he wouldn’t go with them into the Promised Land, Moses answered, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here” (33:15). In other words: “Lord, if you won’t be there, then I’m not going.”

### **Moses discerned the difference between God’s *unlimited* favor and his *ultimate* favor.**

Moses knew how important God’s blessings were to Israel. His supernatural works had saved their lives. He sent manna from heaven when the people faced starvation. He brought water from a rock when their bodies were parched beyond their limits. Yet Moses recognized that even those vital blessings weren’t the point of these experiences. Rather, it was to know and trust the compassionate, loving God who bestowed them. Moses’ next statement comes as no surprise: “Please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight” (Exodus 33:13). Moses knew that, ultimately, God’s favor wasn’t found in the blessings he provided—it was found in knowing the Lord himself.

I thank God for all his earthly blessings. As a pastor, I get to see his amazing work in people's lives all the time. He restores marriages that have broken apart. He provides for those who struggle economically. He brings healing to people's sick, broken bodies. As I write this, I think of a little boy named Isaiah who wasn't expected to live for ten days beyond his birth. After he survived the first year, doctors said he would never walk. Recently, his mom sent me a video of young Isaiah dancing with a little girl at a wedding. I also think of a young man named Chad who was beaten down by the people meant to nurture him. The circumstances Chad faced in life were unbelievably hard. Yet now Chad is catching on to how much God loves him, and he wants to be baptized.

All of these things speak of God's *unlimited favor*—his ability to breathe life into any desert wilderness. We all experience his favor in ways too great to measure: Our relationships, our health, our work, our school. When we struggle in any area of life, or our circumstances get too difficult, he sustains us with his soothing presence. God has done things in our lives we never could imagine happening. His unlimited favor knows no boundaries.

Yet Moses knew something of God that exceeds his blessings, even his supernatural works. He knew that beyond God's unlimited favor is his *ultimate favor*. This sort of favor isn't found in the things God does—it's found in the Lord himself. As Moses said, in so many words, "Lord, what good are grapes and milk and honey—all the blessings of life—if you're not present?"

A famous Christian writer posed a similar question. He asked, in essence, "What if heaven was a place where you could have everything you wanted—where all your dreams come true, every aspiration and desire is made a reality—but God isn't there? Would you want to go?" It's a legitimate question for any Christian. Do we desire God's blessings apart from knowing him, the Giver of all good things? Or, like Moses, would we prefer to have every blessing stripped away rather than lose God's presence?

I don't take God's blessings lightly. And neither does his Word. There's hardly a book in the Bible that doesn't mention God's concern for the poor. Poverty affects every area of life, and we're to give food to the hungry, hope to the downcast, healing to the brokenhearted. But for those of us who know God's abundant blessings, Moses conveys something important: Even daily bread pales compared to knowing God. Moses' example calls us to experience a higher kind of favor.

It's not that Christians today aren't grateful for God's blessings. Our problem is we stop there. We say, "Lord, your unlimited favor is enough for me." But according to this passage, it *isn't* enough. We can have the most vibrant marriage, the most beautiful home, the most fulfilling job and the greatest kids—but if Jesus isn't in the midst of them, we have nothing.

Are we willing to declare with Moses, "Lord, if you're not there, I won't go"? If we do, God will answer us the way he did Moses: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (33:14).

## **The Lord wanted to enter Canaan with Israel, but he couldn't abide their idolatry.**

Even after the Lord blessed them powerfully, the Israelites turned to idols. While Moses was communing with God in the mountains, the people melted down their jewelry and made a golden statue of a calf. We can't really relate to this kind of thing today. But the upshot is this: When you pursue God's blessings without seeking God himself, you end up in idolatry—because the focus of your pursuit is something earthen. As Paul says, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

Thankfully, today most of us don't have to plead for water or bread. We can just turn on the tap or go to the grocery store. But we have golden idols of our own, things we seek apart from God: Job success, financial security, material comfort. Those aren't bad things—they're great blessings. But if we want them more than we want God—if they become the focus of our life's pursuit—we've built an idol. And God will say to us, "Go ahead, pursue that. Enjoy it. But you won't find me present in it."

I love Moses' response: "God, kill me in the desert before you lead me to someplace that you aren't." I pray this becomes the church's cry as well: "Lord, my life has been so blessed that I've let myself get misdirected. My eyes have been on your unlimited favor, the blessings you give. I want something different. Let my life be defined by your ultimate favor—to know you for who you are."

I want to ask you: Is God enough for you? Does knowing him satisfy you? Or is there anything that keeps you from that, an idol you've put before him? His first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

Knowing God was sufficient for Moses. Rather than going to the Promised Land, he asked, "Please show me your glory" (33:18). I can imagine God's pleasure at hearing this. Every earthly father knows the constant pleading of his children's voices asking for things, but nothing warms a dad's heart like hearing his child say, "Daddy, I love you for who you are."

God was so pleased with Moses' desire that he granted his request, as far as he could allow it. "He said, 'You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live'" (33:20). God's unapproachable light is too fierce for humans to experience fully; his holiness is all consuming: "lest I consume you on the way" (33:3). But he did want Moses to experience his glory in part. The Lord told him, in effect, "I can't show you my face. But I can show you the effects of my presence and the trail of goodness I leave behind" (see 33:21-23).

To protect Moses, he said, "While my glory passes by I will *put you in a cleft of the rock...until I have passed by*" (33:22, *my emphasis*). This verse tells us everything about God's amazing grace in the Old Testament. Even before the cross—before Christ shed his blood for our salvation—God hid Moses in his grace, in the crevice of a rock. As Paul explains, "The Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Scripture says Moses' face was transformed by God's glory—a change so powerful he had to "put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome" (2 Corinthians 3:13). Anyone who encounters Jesus experiences the same transformation—a change so profound the whole world sees it and is awed.

## Today God has removed this veil to reveal the fullness of his glory in Christ.

"We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). We don't have to hide in a crevice as Moses did; God's glory has been revealed fully in Jesus. We don't have to wait for water to be poured from a rock; rivers of Living Water flow to us continually from his indwelling Spirit. Friend, God's ultimate favor isn't in a house or car or job—it's in his presence, and he doesn't withhold it from us. Christ's blood has lifted the veil completely so we can know his glory without hindrance. That is God's supreme, ultimate favor!

The Israelites could have experienced God's glory just as Moses did. The Lord wanted to accompany them into the Promised Land, but their bitterness prevented it. It had happened before. When they were without water in the wilderness, the people put God on trial. The original Hebrew language suggests a "hammer" or "gavel," meaning they judged the Lord and convicted him.

What a horrible act, especially for a people so blessed by God. At a time when they could have trusted him in faith, they complained, "At least in Egypt we had food and water. We had safety and security. We had homes to live in." Now that those things were taken away, the people were consumed with bitterness. Their idols had overcome them.

Yet here was God's mercy to them: Despite their sin, God told Moses to strike a rock with his staff—and water came flowing out. That rock represents Jesus, taking on the wrath of judgment for our sins. Then God offered them Living Water: "For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Let me ask you a final question: What does your heart long for? Is your main dream a financial goal, a material desire? Or is it the hope of God's glory, which transforms all of life? He has blessed you abundantly with his unlimited favor. Yet there's more to know of our great God than earthly blessings. He wants you to know his glorious presence in every realm of life. I urge you to pray with me: "Lord, show me every idol that prevents me from your presence. Don't let anything—even good things—blind me to you in any way. I won't go anywhere or do anything if you're not there! Amen."

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