



MICHAEL J. GLODO

THE
LORD
BLESS YOU
& KEEP
YOU

THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL
IN THE AARONIC BLESSING

“Deep in the Reformation worship tradition of both Luther and Calvin is the consistent use of the Aaronic blessing. So it is a delight and a privilege to read and recommend Michael Glodo’s book-length treatment of this beautiful and powerful portion of God’s word, deepening our understanding and renewing our use of our Reformed heritage.”

Bryan Chapell, Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church in America

“This book infuses our shallow understanding of what it means to be blessed with scriptural insight and textual richness. It invites us to think more deeply about what is promised in the familiar words of the Aaronic blessing so that we hear them with fresh meaning and find ourselves receiving them with profound joy.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*

“Michael Glodo’s *The Lord Bless You and Keep You* is a rich exposition of a beloved and important divine blessing. Glodo’s many years of teaching biblical studies and pastoral theology, as well as his own pastoral experience and instincts, really show up in this book. This exegetical, biblical-theological deep dive into the Aaronic blessing will edify you devotionally and equip you to understand the profundity of what it means for the Lord’s face to shine upon his people.”

Ligon Duncan, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“We often hear the words of the Aaronic blessing pronounced at the end of worship services. There’s a beauty to its rhythm; its vocabulary sparkles with grace—*bless, keep, peace*. And we all want God’s face to shine on us! And yet, despite the popularity of this blessing, we rarely hear anyone explaining what these words really mean or what difference they make to daily life. Thankfully, Michael Glodo has arrived to help us! Combining the heart of a pastor with the understanding of an Old Testament scholar, as well as a deep appreciation of worship, he brings us treasure in both hands. *The Lord Bless You and Keep You* is a book to savor and enjoy.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“The Aaronic blessing is one of the great poems of the Bible, yet its simple language can catch us off guard. We find ourselves so familiar with it that we take its content for granted and miss its striking depths. Michael Glodo has done us a big service in this little book on the brief blessing that carries such great truths—in particular great truths about faces, both ours and God’s—truths many of us were not ready to appreciate until we spent months covering our faces in public. Far from being irrelevant today, this ancient blessing is, in fact, all the more true and precious to those who profess Jesus as Lord. Learn what it means and pray it afresh over the souls of those you love most.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org;
Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“The Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6) is often the great blessing offered to God’s people before they depart from worship services and scatter into the world. These words have surely been some of the most familiar among God’s people for millennia. Yet few have thought about their importance. Michael Glodo not only defines and provides insight into these lines but also demonstrates the great influence the Aaronic blessing has on the entire Christian life. Be prepared to experience an old text in a new way and have your eyes opened to a life lived in light of the Aaronic blessing. The comfort, challenge, and grace this knowledge provides will bring a new appreciation for the beauty of our God and his blessings upon his people.”

Jason Helopoulos, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan; author, *The New Pastor’s Handbook* and *Covenantal Baptism*

“In this book, Michael Glodo offers more than just a wonderful study of the Aaronic blessing. He provides a rich biblical-theological survey of the theme of God’s ‘face’ as it unfolds across the pages of Scripture and wise pastoral-theological applications of the numerous ways God ‘shines’ his face on us in our public worship and in our day-to-day lives.”

Scott Swain, President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“I have pronounced the Aaronic blessing over God’s people hundreds of times over four decades of pastoral ministry. Thanks to Michael Glodo’s book—with his outstanding exposition of Numbers 6:22–27, his theological and pastoral insights, and his sound liturgical advice—I’ll forever pronounce the benediction with much greater conviction, meaning, and joy. Whether we pronounce or receive God’s blessing, this book is really worth reading.”

Sandy Willson, Pastor Emeritus, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

“My earliest memory of church is the pronouncement of the Aaronic blessing at the close of worship. It seemed to connect us with ancient Israel and with the church through the ages, militant and triumphant. Michael Glodo has written a beautiful book that captures the emotional, theological, liturgical, and spiritual depths of this word from God. It will edify and strengthen you in faith and hope. It is the product of love for the church to the glory of God.”

Liam Goligher, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

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The Promise of the Gospel in the Aaronic Blessing

Michael J. Glodo

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To the Bride and to the Lamb
Revelation 19:7

*You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,
"Your face, LORD, do I seek."*

PSALM 27:8

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My late colleague Roger Nicole, alluding to the fact that he and Annette had no children but some forty-thousand books, was fond of quipping, "My books are my children." To all my students, current and past, you are my books. Thank you for entrusting a portion of your preparation to me.

Thank you to my wife, Vicki, and children, Rachel and Samuel, for believing the myth of my greatness in spite of my best efforts to debunk it.

Introduction

C. S. LEWIS'S PERSONAL FAVORITE of his own novels, *Till We Have Faces*, is a theodicy—an accusation against the gods. It is told by an aged, veiled queen named Orual who wore a veil her entire life. She did so at first because her father the king thought her ugly—“curd face,” he called her when he first told her to cover her face. But as time went on, she found the veil to be a source of power.

As years passed and there were fewer in the city . . . who remembered my face, the wildest stories got about as to what that veil hid. . . . Some said . . . that it was frightful beyond endurance; a pig's, bear's, cat's or elephant's face. The best story was that I had no face at all; if you stripped off my veil you'd find emptiness. But another sort . . . said that I wore a veil because I was of a beauty so dazzling that if I let it be seen all men in the world would run mad; or else that Ungit [their god] was jealous of my beauty and had promised to blast me if I went bareface. The upshot of all this nonsense was that I became something very mysterious and awful.¹

1 C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), 259–60.

While the veil gave Orual power over others, making her mysterious like their gods, she came to realize it also meant a loss of her humanity. Only by removing her veil at the end of the novel did she become fully human again and get the long-sought answer to her questions from the gods.

More than any other physical feature, we associate the face with a person. And while we say “the eyes are the window to the soul,” award-winning portrait artist Catherine Prescott has said that the mouth is more important than the eyes. According to Prescott, the mouth is where the face’s expression is found because it is part of the soft tissue of the face. While the eyes can indicate six or seven emotions on their own, without the mouth to reinforce what the eyes express, one doesn’t know for certain what the eyes are saying. The mouth is more variable and expressive than the eyes. Therefore, Prescott insists it’s the mouth that shows whether someone is revealing or hiding themselves or whether someone is hostile or friendly. The point is that to really know someone, we must see the whole face not just the eyes.²

Faces matter to people, and so it’s not surprising that faces matter in the Bible. Near the very beginning of the biblical story we find Adam and Eve hiding from the face of God (Gen. 3:8). The end of the biblical story finds believers seeing Jesus Christ face-to-face and being like him (1 John 3:2). All

2 The beginning of this introduction is adapted from a chapel sermon at Reformed Theological Seminary Orlando in December 2020, which developed into an article-length treatment “We Still Have Faces,” *Reformed Faith & Practice* 5, no. 3 (December 2020), 10–19, excerpts of which are included here by permission. “Catherine Prescott on What Is Lost When We Don Face Masks,” interview with Ken Myers, Friday Feature, Mars Hill Audio, August 21, 2020, <https://marshillaudio.org/pages/heres-what-youre-missing#prescott>.

along the way are dramatic encounters with the face of God. In Psalms the face of God is the focus of delights and despair, penance and praise, petitions and punishment. The face of God is a central theme of encounters with and knowing God in the Old Testament. The acme of this theme is the Aaronic blessing, possibly the most-frequently heard passage of Scripture in Christian worship.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;
 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious
 to you;
 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you
 peace.

“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” (Num. 6:22–27)

The Aaronic benediction brings us face-to-face with God’s gracious gaze. The imagery of God unveiling his face to bless his people is in stark contrast to Orual’s mysterious and frightful gods. Yet the Aaronic blessing is not the climax of the story of the Bible. The blessing points forward to the unveiling of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

The prominence of God’s shining face and its centrality to the new covenant beckon us to reflect deeply on it. Luther called the

Psalms “a little Bible” since each psalm sets out in brief form all that is taught in the rest of Scripture.³ I am suggesting the same observation is true of the Aaronic blessing. By exploring the blessing’s background, central elements, spiritual meaning in Israel, and realization in Christ, we will grasp the comprehensive nature of the theme of God’s face and be enabled to stand more fully in its light. We will see that *God made us with faces so that his could shine on ours and that the Aaronic blessing could be to us not only a “little Bible,” but a “little gospel.”*

Our survey will begin with the background behind the blessing; the history of God’s face, if you will. We will consider and look for hints of God’s face (and ours) at creation, the fall, Jacob’s encounter with God at Peniel, and Moses’s vision on Mount Sinai. With that background in view, we’ll examine the Aaronic blessing itself in its original context and in its influence on the spiritual life of Israel as traced out in the Psalms. This Old Testament background will equip us to see the scope and substance of the blessing revealed in Jesus Christ, principally in the Gospel of John and 2 Corinthians 3–4. To see God, however, means to be seen by him. Therefore, chapters 4 and 5 will develop our understanding of God’s gracious gaze in Christ, first with implications for ourselves and then with implications for how we think and act toward others. Before concluding we will return to the Aaronic blessing itself to reflect on how it can illuminate and animate our worship. Finally an appendix offers a sample order of worship to stimulate ideas for applying this study in corporate worship.

3 Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, Luther’s Works, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1960), 254.

The metaphor of God's shining face itself calls for contemplation. This book regularly offers numerous Scripture references and prompts for more in-depth reflection. I invite readers to pause to look up Scripture passages, read them in their context, and reflect. Some readers may wish to keep a journal for their reflections and growing understanding on the prospect of God's gracious gaze on his people.

Each chapter ends with a "For Further Reflection" section. Some of the questions and suggestions assume a group context since, as chapter 5 might suggest, groups are the best places to contemplate the blessings of God's gracious gaze. All of the questions can be applied to individual study with a bit of imagination. If you are studying this book in a group, keep in mind that the chapters are not written in uniform slices like a symmetrically sliced pizza, but more like the movements of a symphony, which differ in character and length but that all contribute to the unity of the single work. Therefore, some chapters may lend themselves to more than one group discussion session.

If any of my children ever passes through Chattanooga, they leap at the chance to heed the barn roof signs for miles around and "see Rock City" again. Even though they have been there many times before as children and adults, they get nostalgic revisiting the familiar nooks and crannies, and they revel in finding new pathways and approaches that put the old sites in a new light. Similarly, this study may be a first visit to the sites of the Aaronic blessing for some of you. To others there may not be many new sites, but perhaps you will find new vistas of the familiar. Whichever the case, cultivating a

INTRODUCTION

growing appreciation of God's gaze is a worthy lifelong pursuit. In Psalm 27:8 the psalmist recites an invitation from God: "You have said, 'Seek my face.'" To this invitation we hear the psalmist's resolve: "My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek.'" May this study encourage and enable your search for the beatific vision.

The Prequel to the Aaronic Blessing

The Context of the Blessing

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I SAW A MOVIE CLIP at the end of a presentation. The scene depicted an older man in Arlington National Cemetery kneeling before an alabaster cross. “I tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope at least in your eyes I earned what all of you have done for me.”¹ Turning to his approaching wife, he pled with her, “Tell me I’ve led a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.”

It was a poignant scene and made the speaker’s point. However, I was left wondering about the surrounding story of the clip since the speaker didn’t provide any context. At this point you might assume I don’t see many films since that scene is widely known

1 *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures, 1998).

as the dramatic conclusion to Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan*, starring Tom Hanks. While I do watch my fair share of films and I had watched most of *Saving Private Ryan* several times before, I had never seen the conclusion!

Previous Encounters

A similar experience can be true of how we often read the Bible. Many individual portions of Scripture are familiar to us, but we don't always know them as part of a larger story and context. This is often true of the story of the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24–26). This blessing arises out of a long-running story and leads to the climactic conclusion. The story is that of the “beatific vision,” of seeing God:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple . . .

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!
You have said, “Seek my face.”
My heart says to you,
“Your face, LORD, do I seek.” (Ps. 27:4, 7–8)

The story that precedes the blessing of God's gracious gaze is one of people seeing, avoiding, longing for, and catching a glimpse

of the face of God. The face of God is a looming visage across the chapters of the Bible leading to when God would administer this blessing through Aaron. To fully understand the Aaronic blessing, we must appreciate the prequel events that constitute the context of God's gracious gaze. If the Aaronic blessing means that God has made us with faces so that his could shine on ours, we need to know the backstory of faces. We'll find that this context consists of past face-to-face encounters with God. There are four such encounters which will help us, two in Eden and one each at Penuel and Sinai.

God Made Us with Faces

The first mention of God's face occurs when God finds Adam and Eve hiding after their "declaration of independence" by eating the forbidden fruit. Having experienced a loss of original righteousness, their eyes were opened and they perceived that they were naked. Their autonomous move left them without the protection and provision of God's covenant lordship. Consequently, when God drew near for the kind of intimate fellowship with them that had existed before, they hid themselves from God's face (Gen. 3:8). Most Bible translations say "presence" instead of "face," but it is the same Hebrew word (*pāneh*). The anthropomorphic language, such as God "walking," justifies a more literal rendering of "face" though used in a figurative way (3:8). Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves from being seen, from God's face, and from his gaze.

Seeing God and being seen by him in fellowship is the very purpose for which people were created. God made people in his image and likeness in order for them to reflect his glory (Gen. 1:26). Just as a mirror will only reflect light in the presence of that

light, to be made in God's image reflects God's purpose for us to be in his presence. To be in God's image was also to be a son of God. The same term "image" is used in Genesis 5:3 to describe Adam's relationship to his son Seth. We might say a particular child is the "spitting image" of a parent. So also to be made in God's image means being in a filial relationship to him. Additionally, "likeness" (Gen. 1:26) denotes a being who is a relational creature. This is because the particular Hebrew word (*dēmût*) describes three-dimensional things such as sculptures rather than two-dimensional things such as paintings. Three-dimensional things require perspective in order to be known fully and require others in order to know themselves. If we were two-dimensional creatures, we could know ourselves fully simply by looking in a mirror, but as three-dimensional creatures we need other people to help us see ourselves completely, for example the back of our heads. The sources of our self-knowledge are many. For example, we could ask for direct descriptions of ourselves from our friends. A vast source of self-knowledge is what we learn about ourselves as we move through life and observe the effects (or non-effects) we have on those around us.

Most importantly, we need to be seen and known by God to fully know ourselves. This interpersonal, relational need is the essence of our nature and its satisfaction is found in seeing and being seen by God. God made us with faces so that his could shine on ours.

The Hidden Face of Shame

God instituted curses on the man and woman for their rebellion (Gen. 3:16–19), but they were only symptoms or signs of the

greater curse of alienation from God. The curses would serve as painful teachers, and when paired with the promise of redemption (the first gospel or *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15), the curses might fuel a longing for restoration with God. The overwhelming and fundamental tragedy of human autonomy was the creature's alienation from God the Creator. The compulsion to hide from God's face meant the loss of protection, provision, and self for our first parents, and shame came to dominate the human condition. From then on people would live with a simultaneous longing and loathing for the face of God, because it was and is both the greatest delight and the greatest horror. The curses of the fall meant life would be futile. God would preserve the life-giving power of the womb and the soil, and yet both would provide perpetual reminders of alienation from the face of God as humanity was driven out of Eden. While God graciously covered their shame in giving them garments (Gen. 3:21), he did not cover their faces. Paradise was lost, but only for a time, for they took with them the promise that "everything sad" would become "untrue" (to paraphrase J. R. R. Tolkien's character, Sam Gamgee). One day a seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

Cain

As the first person born into the world outside of Eden, Cain exemplifies the "fallen face," the face that looks downward instead of toward the face of God. True to the synergism in his name ("I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord," Gen. 4:1), Cain is fundamentally self-reliant, treating God as a totem rather than as the generous Creator and sustainer of life. The difference between his and his younger brother Abel's offerings was not that

Abel's involved blood as is popularly believed, for these were offerings not sacrifices. Offerings were not for atonement but were representative portions of what God had graciously provided to them. Cain and Abel each brought a portion of what God had provided through their respective callings as farmer and shepherd. The difference between the offerings was that Abel brought the very best—the fat portions of the firstborn lamb—while Cain brought “an” offering (Gen. 4:3–4). Abel's offering was made in faith; Cain's was a token gesture.² When God had regard for Abel's offering but not for Cain's, Cain became angry and his “face fell” (4:5). Cain's external countenance betrayed an intense inner jealousy leading to the first fratricide and a renunciation of the fundamental social obligation that all people, but especially brothers, have for one another. (“Am I my brother's keeper?” 4:9.) For his sin, Cain was sentenced by God to become a “fugitive and a wanderer” (4:12). Cain laments that he was being driven from the “face of the ground” (*lit. translation of* 4:14) and hidden from God's face. He expressed his grief not in the loss of fellowship with God, but in the loss of divine protection. “Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (4:14). Just as he viewed God functionally when it came to the produce of the ground, he viewed God's presence with the same pragmatic concern. He didn't want God; he simply wanted God's provision and protection.

Protection and provision constitute a broad biblical theme that stretches from the opening chapter of Genesis until the new

2 Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 97.

creation. The story of creation begins with the world in chaos and emptiness and proceeds through God bringing order (days 1–3) and fullness (days 4–6). These twin themes of order and fullness set a trajectory that is detectable through the whole biblical story, such as in God’s covenant assurance to Abram that he would be his shield and great reward (Gen. 15:1). In the absence of God, chaos and emptiness encroach—such as in the flood of Noah—but in his presence, there is safety and succor (e.g., Psalm 23). Abel, as a shepherd, exemplified the promised seed of the woman, who would wander from pasture to pasture in immediate dependence upon God’s protection and provision. Cain, as a farmer, exemplified the kind of reliance on human achievement that led to Lamech’s abusive boast (Gen. 4:23–24), Babel’s idolatrous aspirations (Gen. 11:4), and even Lot’s incremental affinity for the city that led him from the mountain pastures of the promised land to citizenship in Sodom (Gen. 13:10–11; 14:12; 19:9). Cain’s great fear was being dislodged from the security of technological society, believing that God could only provide for and protect him when he was landed and not uprooted from that land. God met Cain’s disbelief with a “not so!” and graciously provided a mark of protection (Gen. 4:15), though Cain’s departure to the land of “wandering” (“Nod,” 4:16) indicates this protection would be more akin to the sword of the civil magistrate rather than the magisterial covering of God’s gracious gaze. Cain epitomized fallen man because he loved God’s good gifts more than God’s gracious gaze.

Jacob

The story of God’s face takes a mysterious turn in the life of Jacob. Though Jacob was the second-born son of Isaac and Rebekah,

God sovereignly decreed beforehand that Jacob would receive the double portion of inheritance of God's promises (Gen. 25:19–28). Nevertheless, from his birth to the ford of Jabbok, Jacob relentlessly, resourcefully, and deceptively strove to gain advantages. He stole the birthright from Esau by playing to Esau's impulsive appetites (Gen. 25:29–34), he deceived Isaac in order to steal the firstborn's blessing (Gen. 27:1–40), and he waged a fourteen-year battle of wits with Laban, his father-in-law (Gen. 29–30). Jacob's manipulative self-reliance only sowed hatred in his brother, forcing Jacob to flee Canaan to find a wife (Gen. 27:41), and that same self-reliance compelled him to return to Canaan due to the rancor it created with Laban (Genesis 31).

On the night Jacob left Canaan, God appeared to him at Bethel and swore to be with him wherever he went, to bring him back, and to fulfill for him all the promises God had made to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:10–17). Nevertheless, Jacob responded, "If God will be with me . . . then the LORD shall be my God" (Gen. 28:20–21). True to the meaning of his birth name, "he clutches" or "he supplants," Jacob saw life as a zero-sum game, tit-for-tat, life only gives what is grabbed. Despite this, God was with him as promised during Jacob's sojourn with Laban. Across the brook of Jabbok, however, Esau waited. His anger had had fourteen years to ripen. The prospect of Esau's florid face must have weighed heavily on Jacob and slowed his steps as an increasing weight on his back during his journey home. Indeed, Jacob sent ahead three successive tribute parties to appease his brother, followed by his wives and children, leaving Jacob completely alone in the dark. His isolation epitomized his entire life situation except for God's graciousness, which had not dissuaded him from his manipulative ways.

What ensued is one of the most enigmatic and dramatic scenes in all the Bible. The scene begins with ominous minimalism—“And Jacob was left alone” (Gen. 32:24). With equal minimalism the action is described—“And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day” (32:24). The straining, sweat, gasping, and dust are described almost nominally, as if the efforts of at least one party are hardly worth elaboration. At the end of this long night—and, at the end of Jacob’s long years of self-reliance—the real drama unfolded.

The identity of the stranger was mysterious at first. He was simply “a man” (32:24). In typical biblical fashion, we learn the identity of this character not through the narrator’s prosaic description, but through the man’s words and actions. At first he seemed bound by Jacob and unable to prevail (32:26), but Jacob’s request makes clear that Jacob is the inferior—“I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Before responding, the stranger demanded to know Jacob’s name, really more a call for Jacob’s self-confession than for the stranger’s identification. Indeed, Jacob had been a “clutcher” and “supplanter.” Perhaps in contemporary colloquial terms he would have been called “slick.” Such self-reliance had left him depleted and without an option except to confess his name. To Jacob’s confession the stranger, exercising his now-apparent sovereignty over Jacob, responded by renaming Jacob “Israel,” “he who strives with God” (32:28). All of Jacob’s conniving has not been with Isaac, Esau, or Laban but with God himself.

The glorious irony of this story mustn’t escape us. The one who had named Jacob from the beginning, promised him the inheritance of the greatest promise ever made, and had been with Jacob throughout the fourteen years of sojourn is the one who

asked his name. Was Jacob without a clue? Or had the exhausting night begun to open his eyes as the sun began to rise? In a single moment Jacob had come to the end of his resourcefulness while also finally finding the source of ultimate and perfect goodness. The stranger was the very one who first had named him “Jacob.” Thus, Jacob named the place “Peniel,” which means “face of God,” explaining “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered” (32:30).

Jacob has had the gracious promises of God all of his days, but only now when all of his stratagems, strength, and strainings are exhausted, only in his complete and utter weakness, only when he is hobbled does he find grace. The paradox is expressed beautifully in Charles Wesley’s “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown.”

Come, O Thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold but cannot see;
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day. . . .

Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquered by my instant prayer;
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if Thy name be Love.³

3 Charles Wesley, “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown,” *The Sacred Harp* (Huntsville, AL: Sacred Harp Publishing, 1991), 95.

Jacob had petitioned during the wrestling match for two things: (1) the stranger's blessing and (2) the stranger's name. Four hundred years later, Aaron would be instructed to bless the people, Jacob's descendants, with the assurance of God's face shining upon them such that God's name was placed upon them (Num. 6:23–27). Though it would be generations before Aaron receives this command, this episode is pregnant with the Aaronic blessing because Jacob realized that he asked for these blessings from God himself and named the place Peniel, "face of God." Though in a veiled, mysterious way and before the full light of day had dawned, Jacob experienced God's gracious gaze when he came to the end of his own resourcefulness.

Moses

The face of God enters once again into the story of Israel in the life and ministry of Moses. Moses's encounter with the face of God is unparalleled in the Old Testament. We know Moses encountered the glory of God at the burning bush on Sinai when he was called by God to lead Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3). Later at Mount Sinai once again with the now-redeemed nation in tow, Moses ascended into the cloud and fire while the people remained trembling below (Ex. 20:18–21). As Moses received the Law on the mountain, the people became restless and in spite of God's miraculous plagues, deliverance from Egypt, and presence on the mountain, they demanded that Aaron make them "gods" (plural) who would "go before" them to continue the journey (Ex. 32:1). Both their demand for a pantheon (instead of a single god) as well as the calf form of Aaron's workmanship revealed a tragic equivocation of trust. Accustomed to the pantheons of the surrounding

peoples and the several bovine deities of Egypt, the petition of the people and the production of their priest foreshadowed the divided hearts that would leave this first generation out of Egypt short of their promised inheritance in Canaan.

While the demand for gods to “go before us” undoubtedly expressed the desire for a god to lead them on, it’s not incidental that Aaron answered this desire with a visible idol. The Hebrew word for “before” is actually the compound of the preposition “to” or “for” with the word for face (*lě + pāneh*). While I am not suggesting “before” here literally means “before our faces,” their shrouded God and missing mediator Moses caused them to want to walk by sight and not by faith. The inertia of unbelieving minds is always toward visible creation and away from the invisible Creator.

When God learned of the people’s sin, he called Moses to step aside in order for God to bring swift judgment upon the people (Ex. 32:10). Instead of stepping aside, Moses interceded on behalf of the people, appealing to God’s honor and to God’s sworn promise to Abraham centuries earlier (Ex. 32:11–13). God relented from visiting his full wrath upon the people (Ex. 32:14) and affirmed his promise to bring them to the promised land, yet he announced that he himself would not go with them (Ex. 33:1–3), but only provide an angel to lead them. When the word of this spread to the people they were grieved and humbled themselves (Ex. 33:4–6). This is the context in which we are told of the pattern of intimate communication that existed between God and Moses (Ex. 33:7–11).

When Moses would enter the tent, the people would rise, watch, and worship (Ex. 33:8, 10) as the glory cloud also entered

the tent. This describes not just a one-time encounter, but a pattern displaying God's visible indication that Moses was God's chosen person through whom God revealed himself to his people. The narrative then turns from simple description to qualitative comment to say, "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11).

What does face-to-face mean? Commentators are quick to point out that we mustn't take it literally since within the next few verses God will also say, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). Yet in being too quick to exclude a literal sense, we risk failing to perceive the intimacy conveyed by the expression. Moses spoke with God in-person, person-to-person as it were. As we inhabit a world today in which in-person interpersonal interaction is declining and even eschewed, this description calls us back to a longing for the interpersonal intimacy implied and required of our embodied lives. The necessities of life often remove us from the presence of many of those we love most, but we are still creatures with bodies. More particularly, we are creatures with faces, created to know and be known by others in one another's presence.

The narrative's "interruption" of Moses's intercession is not really an interruption. It is a reminder and an amplification for us to see what kind of man was interceding on behalf of the nation of Israel. Though not a man of absolute moral perfection, Moses was of such a consecrated life that he could go up the mountain and into the tent. As we will see, consecration is the prerequisite to beholding God's gracious gaze. This face-to-face-ness is the venue from where Moses interceded. His model intercession appealed to God's glory (i.e., reputation), goodness, and covenant (Ex. 32:11–14). Though

God would have seen to it that the people made it to the promised land without God's presence, that was not enough for Moses, for to have the land without the Lord would be to have nothing (Ex. 33:15). Moses's face-to-face intercession prevailed, and God answered, "My presence (*lit.*, "face") will go with you" (Ex. 33:14). "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name" (Ex. 33:17).

Emboldened perhaps by his successful intercession and enticed by the beauty of God's presence, Moses asked further, "Please show me your glory" (Ex. 33:18). God replied, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). However he continued, "While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:22–23). This is the most intimate encounter with God of any in the entire Old Testament, setting the stage for the Aaronic blessing which follows this encounter shortly, but more importantly it provides the backdrop for the appearance of the glory of God in Christ.

"My Voice You Heard"

It was Israel's privilege as God's chosen people to hear him speak to the whole nation face-to-face from Mount Sinai (Deut. 5:4). Their possession of the law, along with God's mighty works on their behalf, constituted their distinctive witness among the nations (Deut. 4:6–8). Before reminding them of that privilege, God gave an ominous warning against idolatry (Deut. 4:15–31) and recapitulated the awesome way in which he had appeared and spoken to them.

You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. (Deut. 4:12)

Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? (Deut. 4:33)

Israel must remember that God didn't speak to them in the same way as he did with Moses, but at their insistence at Sinai, God spoke to them *through* Moses (Deut. 18:15–17). They must listen to God by listening to Moses if they wish to choose life rather than death (Deut. 30:19). After all, Moses was the prophet *par excellence*, the measuring stick for every subsequent prophet and the paradigm for a greater prophet like him whom God would raise up one day (Deut. 18:15, 18).

Throughout his tenure of leadership, Moses was so closely associated with God's actions and words, that at times Moses is described as the one who did the mighty works (Deut. 34:10–12) and the one in whom the people were to believe (Ex. 14:31). Thus the final scene of Moses's life as he ascended Mount Pisgah to look over into the promised land, which he himself would not enter, ends with the epitaph: "And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face . . ." (Deut. 34:10). The one who spoke to God face-to-face is now declared to be *known* by God with the same level of intimacy.

Deuteronomy, which stresses the incomparability of Yahweh, closes with an acknowledgment of the incomparability of Moses himself. Indeed, one Jewish tradition links God and Moses beautifully by imagining God declaring, "Moses said of me, 'There is none like Yahweh,' and so I in turn bear witness that 'There is

none like Moses.”⁴ To know God face-to-face was the acme of human existence, and the privilege was uniquely Moses’s. This is the context in which Aaron was commissioned to declare the blessing of God’s gracious gaze upon God’s people.

Conclusion

I recently purchased eyeglasses online. While online shopping accesses a greater variety of options, it has the disadvantage of not providing the same “look and feel” possibilities of a retail store. While the feel is hard to duplicate online, the online eye-glass providers allowed me to upload a personal photograph and superimpose frames on my photograph’s face to see what they’d look like on me. This experience mirrors one of the primary functions of biblical narratives. While in one sense the whole Bible is about God, the vast parade of biblical characters provides us with mirrors to hold up next to ourselves. While this is a basic technique for reading all narratives, whether children’s fables or Victorian novels, it’s an especially important way to read biblical narratives. As you read, I encourage you to think: *Who in this particular story resembles me the most in their words, actions, and attitudes? What would I have done in that situation? Who should I emulate? Whose example convicts me of similar ignorance and error?*

Are we like Adam and Eve in the fresh glow of creation’s dawn, seeing our Maker in sinless bliss? Of course not, but do we have a longing in us to see what only they had seen? Are we, like them, hiding from God’s face in the garden—Adam with back bowed and face downcast under the futility of thorns and thistles, daily

4 Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 313.

looking at the dust that will one day reclaim him? Are we like Cain with averted gaze, desiring protection and provision from living in the light of God's face but unwilling to bring ourselves to look into God's face because of our unbending self-reliance? Are we like Jacob, having spent our lives cultivating a religious self-reliance by grasping what God has freely promised us, only to find that God, in his fatherly discipline, has stripped away all of our tricks and efforts in order to bring us low and confront us in the dark night of the soul? Have we wrestled with God in the night so that now we walk with a limp of grace, having seen the face of God? While Moses occupied a unique role that only Jesus Christ ultimately fulfills (Heb. 3:5), are we so enticed with the beatific vision of seeing God's face that seeking God's face is the pearl of great price, the treasure in whose light "the things of earth will grow strangely dim"?⁵ Each of these characters are key figures in Israel's origin story and offer themselves to us so that we might long for the look of God's gracious gaze.

For Further Reflection

1. Try to come up with a title or a slogan to describe each person or phase of relating to the face of God. For example, Adam and Eve before the fall might be "unfettered facetime" or Jacob might be "low light exposure." See if you can have fun with different ideas.
2. Are there any persons or phases in encountering the face of God with which you identify most? Or are there periods in your life that seem a lot like these Old Testament episodes?

5 Helen Howarth Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1997), no. 481.

THE PREQUEL TO THE AARONIC BLESSING

3. What have you learned about yourself as you have read about the persons and phases of the prequel to God's gracious gaze?

4. Having reflected on the people and stages of the revelation of God's face, take time to pray Psalm 27's aspiration, "My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek'" (v. 8).