

God's Inscrutability and Our Response
Exodus 24.12-18 and Exodus 34.6-7
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The Problem

One of the hardest transitional moments as a young parent is the day your newborn learns to crawl. Up to that point, when you put them down on the ground, and go to rinse out a bottle or grab a board book really quickly, when you turn back around they're always right there where you left them.

But then when they learn to crawl you put them down and turn your back and when you turn back around they're not there where you put them.

So no more putting them down and turning your back . . . for the next twenty five years or so

So what happens when God learns to crawl?

What happens when God isn't there where we left him? What happens if he doesn't respond on our terms, in a way that makes sense to us?

When we first begin to learn about God, the things we learn about God make him seem predictable and tidy and reasonable.

God loves us. He always does what is good. God answers our prayers. God protects us. God provides for us. God defends his people. God rules over the earth. God is always working for God.

This is who God is. This is how God works. This is what God does. This is what motivates God's heart. These are God's promises.

We have the sense that when we lay God down somewhere and turn our back on him for a moment, when we turn back around he should still be where we left him.

Still doing his reasonable, predictable, tidy thing.

What happens when he isn't?

What happens when God doesn't act in ways that make sense to us?

What happens when he asks something hard or costly of us?

What happens when we pray about something and don't get a clear sense of an answer?

What happens when God leads us away from the things that make sense to us and towards things that don't?

What happens when I am made to wait?

What happens if God doesn't do what I ask?

Or act in ways that seems reasonable to me?

What if I pray for healing and he doesn't answer the prayer?

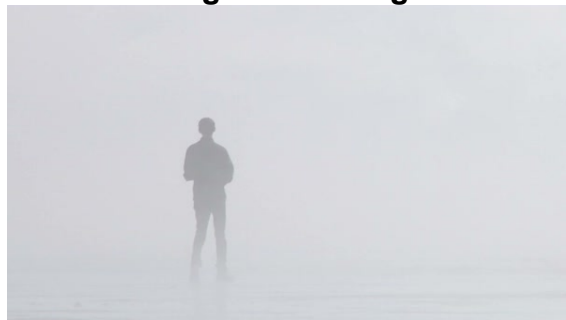
What if I ask for guidance and I get nothing but silence?

What if I long to be married and pray for a spouse and no one comes along?

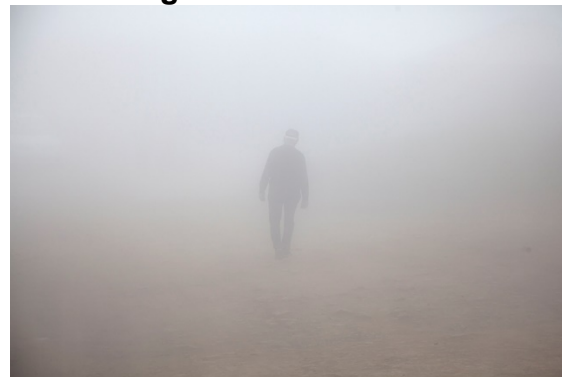
What if I'm diagnosed with cancer and God doesn't answer my prayer for healing?

What happens when we turn toward God and this is our experience?

Person in Fog on the Oregon Coast



Man in Fog in the Caucus Mountains



Text

Two perplexing chapters from the story of Moses and God's people encountering God at Mt Sinai

In this series on intimacy with God, we've seen how God has taken the initiative to bring his people near, invite them into his presence, give them glimpses of his nature, character, and heart, make provision for their sin so that they can approach him, given them a written record of his heart to be in relationship with them – all things that would lead you to think there would never be a time when God seemed impenetrable or inaccessible or out of reach.

But then things like this happen.

The first is in Exodus 24, the same chapter we looked at the last two Sundays. But I want you to see what happens after the covenant meal.

Exodus 24.12-14

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

Exodus 24.13-14

Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them."

Exodus 24.15-16

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.

Think about what that would be like. God calls you near.

Exodus 24.12: Come up to me on the mountain and stay here.

And then . . . nothing.

Just imagine what those six days were like

Wait a few minutes, then hours, then overnight

Did I miss something? Am I being played with?

After *six days* God calls to Moses

What is the longest you have every waited for something/someone?

The second is in Exodus 33 and 34. Moses, high up on Mt Sinai, says

Exodus 33.18-20

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Exodus 33.21-23

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Exodus 34.5-7

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

God passes before Moses, and he reveals the essence of his heart, but Moses only sees what God wants him to see, and even that he doesn't see until God passes by. So

God is both hiding himself from Moses and revealing himself to Moses at the same time.

Do you ever get the sense that there is as much you are not able to see of God as there is that you can see?

Inscrutable

When theologians speak about the attributes of God, alongside God's omniscience and his power and his love, they include ***the inscrutability of God.***

Inscrutable means difficult to understand or interpret

It means that parts of God are beyond our scrutiny. There are aspects of God that remain outside of our view and outside of our understanding. There are things God does that we might not expect or predict.

A W Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* on the attributes of God, in a chapter titled "God Incomprehensible"

Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get him where we can use him, or at least know where he is when we need him. We want a God we can in some measure control. We need the feeling of security that comes from knowing what God is like. (16)

The Paradox

There is a significant paradox and tension for us as evangelical Christians who believe the Bible is a faithful and true revelation of God to his people.

On the one hand, we have God's word, and we are so confident that it is reliable and true. The scriptures are inspired by God and reveal truth about the nature and character of God about which we don't have the slightest doubt.

Jeremiah 9.23-24

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

And yet on the other hand, that very word in which we place so much confidence teaches us that his ways are not our ways.

Isaiah 55.8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,
declares the LORD.
As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As we move from the Old Testament to the New, the problem of God's inscrutability doesn't go away.

Yes, we have Jesus, God in the flesh, who makes God known to us in ways Moses never could have imagined.

John 1.18

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

But just because we have Jesus doesn't mean the mystery of God disappears. God's inscrutability remains.

Romans 11.33-34

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?

As evangelicals we can make an understandable but wrong leap.

We can veer so easily into thinking that because we have been given his revelation – because we can know him *sufficiently* – we think we can fully understand him and predict his ways *fully*.

Because we have the Bible, and Jesus, giving us all we *need* to know about God, we believe we know all there *is* to know about God.

God is personal and knowable, and He has given us His word and his son in order that we might know Him better. But there is much about our infinite and transcendent God that is, and will always be, mysterious and inscrutable.

Not the essence of his heart and character, those we can know with confidence, but the ways God works in a given circumstance are often utterly beyond our scrutiny.

Lament

The psalms are a helpful indicator of what we can expect in our relationship with God.

Half the psalms are about God's inscrutability. Where are you? What are you up to? Why are you allowing this to happen?

As but one example from among so many possible examples, the opening lines of

Psalm 83.1

O God, do not be silent!
 Do not be deaf.
 Do not be quiet, O God

There are as many psalms lamenting a sense of God's absence and his seeming disengagement from our lives as there are psalms of praise celebrating a sense of God's presence and his involvement in our lives.

God himself is preparing us to expect that, that we can know sufficiently something of his nature and character and something of his heart, because he has made those things known to us, we rarely know his mind sufficiently to know how he will act in any given situation.

Someone gets cancer. Will God heal her, and bring himself glory in that way, or will God allow her to suffer and die from that cancer, and bring himself glory in another way? Either could be perfect manifestations of the heart of a God who is all loving and all powerful.

Let me take this one step further. If you stop and think about it, all the psalms are about the inscrutability of God. Including the psalms that celebrate God's presence and goodness.

For how do we understand or account for God's goodness, his grace, his generosity, his miraculous work, his faithfulness? There is nothing automatic or give about his shepherding us, sheltering us, providing for us, being present to us, being good to us when we fail him or forget him. His presence is as unexpected as his absence, and his goodness as inexplicable as the times when he seems to withhold his power to do good.

Psalm 103 begins

- ¹ Praise the LORD, my soul;
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- ² Praise the LORD, my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits—
- ³ who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,
- ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit
 and crowns you with love and compassion,
- ⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

How do you explain that? That's giving voice to God's inscrutable ways as well.

Cloud of Unknowing

A spiritual classic called *The Cloud of Unknowing* by an unknown author writing in about 1350 in England, says:

Lift up your heart to God. Focus on him alone. Want him, not anything he's made, not anything he's done. Think on nothing but him.

When we approach God this way, the author says, not insisting that we understand everything God does, not insisting that we always feel his presence, we will inevitably:

experience a darkness, like a cloud of unknowing. You must know that this darkness and this cloud will always be between you and your God [at some level], whatever you do. They will always keep you from seeing him clearly by the light of your intellect and will block you from feeling him fully in the sweetness of love in your emotions.

So be sure you make yourself at home in the darkness. . . . It's the closest you can get to God here on earth, by waiting in the darkness and in this cloud.

(Cloud of Unknowing, Chapter 3, 11-12)

Two Wills

Let me share with you one of the things that I think lies at the heart of the inscrutability of God.

One of the hardest relational challenges between two people is the fact that there are two wills involved.

Between a parent and a two year old, or a parent and a fifteen year old.

Between a coach and a player. Between two friends. Between spouses.

You want that, I want this. You think things should go that way, I think they should go this way.

The great temptation is to try to eliminate one of the wills, to bring one will into line with the other.

We can be tempted to try to do that with God, to get God to do what we think he should do.

That is the root of the pagan belief system.

Gods of Egypt, like Isis, Osiris, Ra

Gods of Canaan, like Baal, Ashera

You have a need

You make an offering

By doing that you obligate the god to answer your petition and fulfill your request, giving you a child or healing a disease or helping your crop grow or rescuing you from enemies

I impose my will on the gods and get the outcome I want

God is not the great I will. I will do whatever you ask.
God is the great I am. I am that I am.

We relate to God on his terms and not on our own.

X: me praying as a seven or eight year old kid, "If you're real, just come down here right now, into my room, and show yourself to me."

And he didn't. A crisis of faith that was part of the beginning of my atheism as a kid.

Should have been a crisis of confidence in my own ability as a human being to control God, who is not my peer, who is not a genie, who doesn't sit around waiting for my commands.

And what I saw only years later is that God had already answered that prayer two thousand years before.

We want for there to be only one will between God and us. That's what God wants too.

God also wants there to be only one will between the two of us – but that it would be his.

Tennyson: Our wills are ours, to make them yours [thine]. In Memoriam

Jesus: Not my will but yours be done. Mark 14.36

I John 5.4

This is the confidence we have in approaching God, that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he answers us.

God is not the soft serve ice cream machine at Dairy Queen.
Flip up the handle, out comes your answer to prayer.

God is not at our beck and call. His ways are not our ways. Intimacy with God must make allowance for this: approaching God on His terms and not on our own. Surrender, relinquishment, abandonment – these are qualities necessary for us to grow in genuine intimacy with God.

He relates with us at his initiative, by his grace, but on his terms, not ours.

God will always act in keeping with his own goodness, but he will not always act in keeping with our expectations

Mother Teresa's experience of not feeling God

Letter from Mother Teresa to Rev. Michael van der Peet: "Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see,—Listen and do not hear—the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me—that I let Him have [a] free hand."

Examples of God's inscrutability

X: an agnostic airline pilot, called me from a hotel, in the middle of a panic attack, asking God to remove it – nothing happened

God doesn't want to reinforce your idea that he is just there to make your life go smoother. He wants you to kneel in worship, not kneel in desperation so you can get on with your self-ruled life. He's giving you the gift of showing you how little of your life is really under your control.

Of course he wants to meet you in this. But not as Santa Claus.

X: me given invitations for three unique ministry opportunities – speak at Culver, where I attended high school, lead a retreat for a large church, speak at a conference

all three of which seemed to have significant kingdom potential, and all three of which were appealing to me as I thought about my own name and reputation, and then had a clear sense that God was asking me to say no to all three

You be concerned with my reputation. I'll be concerned with your reputation.

To teach me, as it says in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, that: "He's not asking for your help. He's asking for you."

It is disconcerting not to be able to control God.

Then we come to a place where we realize how comforting it is that we cannot control God.

Our exasperation with God's inscrutability fades away when we give God back his right to be God, and we let him exercise his own will and his freedom to act as he sees fit, and we try to bring our lives and our hearts into line with his will.

God will always act in keeping with his own goodness, but he will not always act in keeping with our expectations

How Moses responds

When God calls him up into the cloud and then requires that he wait for seven days? Moses does what God asks. He waits. And then he enters into the cloud.

And what does he do?

Exodus 24.17-18

To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

He invites him to enter the cloud, which looked like fog to Moses and like consuming fire to the Israelites who watched from below. And there Moses spends another 34 days alone with God in the cloud.

He does what God says

He waits

He goes up

On God's terms and in God's timing

And when God passes before him, and hides as much of himself as he reveals? He bows down at once and worships.

A bowing is not just honoring, it is submitting to his authority, yielding to his will, surrendering to his purposes, letting God rule, letting God be God

Examples in the lives of others of meeting God on his terms and not our own

The invitation is to resign being God's approval board, remove ourselves from the place of scrutinizing everything God does and deciding for ourselves if it makes sense

Shift from trusting our understanding of what God is doing, God acting in certain ways that meet our approval, to trusting God's goodness even when we don't understand his ways.

I think of a conversation I had with a young woman who came back from a mission trip and she was struggling coming to grips with God allowing so much pain and difficult to continue to exist in this world, God not answering prayers in the way we think he should, experiencing dry times with him, being allowed to suffer pain or loss. Relinquishing a simpler child-sized version of God for one that included more mystery, but still clinging to him

I think of speaking with a man who was dying of cancer. Even knowing he was in his final chapter, even knowing there was no cure for what he faced, he said, "I trust God. I love him. He is so good. And I just want to live each day of my life for him, and to do his will."

I think of an email I received from a single woman who expressed to God how hard it was to be single. Wondering why God didn't bring someone into her life even to date, let alone to marry, and his answer to her was, "I am a jealous God and you are mine." Which, she said, brought an end to the discussion and moved her to flat-out worship! With that, she said, her value to Him and His plan for her was "sealed". From that point on she was to keep her eyes on him, trusting, obeying, and serving him, and finding great contentment.

And I think of speaking with a brother in Christ, an athlete all his life, who was dealing with debilitating illness that was robbing him of the use of his legs. He said, "I am just starting to see that everything that God allows to come to me is in the service of his perfect love for me and the refining work he is doing in my life."

God will always act in keeping with his own goodness, but he will not always act in keeping with our expectations

In the light of these things, would you join me in responding as Moses did, bowing down before God and worshiping him?

After service

Last invitation to Summer Share program of dinner's together?

Invitation to linger longer and MARY LOU'S DOUGHNUTS in our wonderful new still taking shape café area/on the deck (?).

Also, at the end of 10:30, a request to have people stick around a few minutes and help us transition the stage and chapel for SWAMP!