



## Sermon Transcript

### March 10, 2019

## Finding God in the Hard Place

### God With Us!

Exodus 33:17-34:9

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 10, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Exodus 33:17-34:9**

33:17 And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” <sup>18</sup> Moses said “Please show me your glory.” <sup>19</sup> And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. <sup>20</sup> But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” <sup>21</sup> And the LORD said “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, <sup>21</sup> and 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. <sup>23</sup> Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

34:1 The LORD said to Moses, “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. <sup>2</sup> Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. <sup>3</sup> No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain. <sup>4</sup> So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. <sup>5</sup> The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will be no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” <sup>8</sup> And Moses quickly bowed his head toward earth and worshiped. <sup>9</sup> And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.

## Introduction

The title of the sermon series that will take us all the way to Easter Sunday is “Finding God in the Hard Place.” It is a title that makes two assumptions. Life is hard. And, God can be found.

I am reading a book called *The Common Rule*. It is a book on spiritual habits. It is written by a lawyer by the name of Justin Earley. At the beginning of the book, he recounts an experience he had that led him to practice the spiritual habits he writes about in the book. One Saturday night around midnight, he woke up with a dreadful panic, sweating and shaking. He suddenly sat up in his bed, expecting to find something terrible happening, but all was quiet. The next day, he had this sense that something was wrong, but went about his day. It was a good day of apple picking with his boys and his wife, and yet he had this gnawing feeling that something wasn’t right. The next night, the same thing happened, only this time he didn’t fall back to sleep. Consequently, he was nervous about going to bed the following night, and sure enough it happened again.

He writes, “I ended up in the emergency room at three in the morning, looking at a doctor who half-apologetically told me nothing was wrong. I was just showing symptoms of clinical anxiety and panic attacks. He assured me—as if it were comforting—that these were very common.” What was fascinating about this story, is that everything about his life seemed to be going very well. And yet, here he was in a “hard place.” He said, “I now see that my body had finally become converted to the anxiety and busyness I’d worship through my habits and routines . . . My head said that God loves me no matter what I do, but my habits said another, that I’d better keep striving to stay loved.”<sup>1</sup> It worked for him until it all collapsed.

When I read his story, I was reminded that the “hard place” comes in so many different forms. Some of you find yourself in a “hard place” this morning because of forces outside of your control. Others, find themselves in a “hard place” because living week to week is just hard and our own shortcomings and imperfections just complicate life all the more. And so the assumption I have this morning is that we all can attest to the fact that we all know the “hard place.”

But the other assumption that anchors this series is that God can be found. In fact, it is often the “hard place” that God uses to show himself to us. Miles McPherson played football in the NFL for the San Diego Chargers. As a rookie, he came under the influence of some veteran players who introduced him to cocaine. He soon found himself in a

“hard place” under the control of this drug. At the same time, there were other players on the team who were rather aggressive about their faith in Jesus and were rather bold in their witness. One of those players confronted McPherson in the aisle of the airplane when he had come out of the bathroom to feed his drug habit. Right there in aisle of the plane, the player looked him in the eyes and said, “If you were to die today, would you go to heaven? You know Jesus wants your heart. What are you going to do?” McPherson confessed, “It freaked me out.” But McPherson recalls, “I was shackled by my habit and utterly helpless against it—I fully believed it would kill me. If anything was going to free me, it had to be mightier than my addiction. I recalled what my Christian teammates had said about the power of Jesus to save me. Who else was going to do it?” He said, “It was God or nothing.” He got on his knees—in the “hard place”—and turned to Jesus. And he testified, “When I got up off of my knees, everything was different. I felt as if I had been delivered—that all the desire to use had fallen away. By God’s grace, from that point forward, I would never do drugs again.”<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that a simple prayer will remove you from the “hard place.” But, it is often the “hard place” that drives us to God. And you can find God there. I promise you this morning, God can be found!

One of the common places we will find ourselves in this sermon series is “the cave.” Throughout Scripture, “the cave” can be a place of retreat. At times, it can be a dark place. It can also be a place of protection when the “hard place” of life comes up against you. But it is also a place where God can be found. I don’t know what your “hard place” is this morning. My assumption is that we all have at least “one” such place. Some may be thinking, just “one” such place would be nice. But I want you to know that God is there. God can be found. That turns the cave and the “hard place” into a sacred place.

This morning we are going to begin by looking at the story of Moses in Exodus 33-34. Here we find him tucked into the cleft of the rock. That is our cave this morning. Why is Moses there? Why is Moses tucked into the cleft of the rock? He is there because God is showing himself to Moses and God is assuring Moses that God will be with him. He is assuring Moses that God will be with the people of Israel. At the end of our passage we hear Moses say, *“If now I have found favor in your sight, please let the Lord go in the midst of us.”* If there is anything I need to know in the “hard place” it is that God is with me. If God is with me, who can be against me? *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”* Why? Because God is with me. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the fiery furnace, *“Did we not cast three men bound into the fire . . . But I see four men unbound . . . and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”* God was with them. God can be found in the “hard place.”

At times the cave seems dark and God seems absent. How do I know God is with me? How can I see God in the cave? This is the cry of Moses in Exodus 33:18, “*Please show me your glory.*” That is a common cry from the cave. I wonder how many here this morning are crying out to God, “Lord, it is dark in here.” “Lord, I need to know you are here.” “*Please show me your glory.*” If I know God is here, I can find my way in the cave. I want to assure you this morning that God is in the cave with you. I know this because of what our passage tells us about God. It tells us that God is a God who draws near to us. He is a God who removes the obstacle that stands between us and God. He is a God who loves to answer the cry, “*Please show me your glory.*” And he does all of this through Jesus.

### **God is a God who draws near to us.**

I can tell you God is in the cave this morning because God is a God who draws near to us. He is the one that comes looking for you. That is the interesting thing about finding God. For starters, when it comes to finding God, you should know that God is the one who actually comes to find you.

In order to understand our passage this morning, we need to first pull the lens back on the text and get a wider perspective of where our passage sits in the book of Exodus. Exodus 32-34 sits right in the middle of thirteen chapters that give detailed instructions on the building of the tabernacle. In Exodus 25-31 you find detailed instructions for building the tabernacle and in Exodus 35-40 you have the pain-staking description of Israel taking those instructions and actually building the tabernacle. That is a lot of detail given in Scripture to the construction of the tabernacle. And our passage sits right in the middle of these thirteen chapters dealing with the construction of the tabernacle.

The tabernacle is more than a worship center for the people of Israel. Even though it occupied space at the center of the camp, it was more than a central place of worship. It was actually a slice of heaven on earth. Much of the symbolism that made up the tabernacle was meant to replicate the scene of heaven. That is why, over thirty times in these thirteen chapters, this tent is called a “a tent of meeting.” It is the place where God meets with his people. Heaven comes to earth. In Exodus 25:8 we are told that the purpose for building the tabernacle was so that God could live with them. Through the tabernacle, God would be with them. He drew near to them.

Another thing you should know is that the building of the tabernacle was a reenactment of God’s work of creating the world. Genesis 1:2 tells us that “*the earth was without form*

*and void and darkness was over the face of the deep.*” It was a picture of a chaotic world. And into this chaotic scene God brings order through what he creates. The result of God’s act of creation was the beautiful Garden of Eden where God walked with man in the cool of the evening. And now through the tabernacle, which is constructed in seven stages (like the seven days of creation) and ends with talk of the Sabbath (the seventh day of creation), God is once again bringing order out of chaos and is beginning the process of being with his people. Through the tabernacle, God is moving towards his creation and providing a way for his people to be in the presence of God.

So what we have here in the constructing of the tabernacle is a way for man to connect with the living God. It is something that only God can initiate and only God can accomplish. Here is what I believe this morning. People want to connect with God. My hunch is that you wouldn’t be here this morning if there was not something inside of you that longed to connect with the living God. The reason you long to make connection with God is because that is what you were made for and created for. You were made to know God and to enjoy God.

The book of Exodus is just the beginning of the story of the Bible. As the story of the Bible unfolds, we know that the portable tabernacle becomes the permanent temple in the city of Jerusalem. But even that is a picture of what is to come. John introduces Jesus to us in the fourth gospel by saying, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* He opened his gospel by telling us that the *Word—Jesus—was with God and was God.* And now, this God is “dwelling among us.” But then even Jesus tells his disciples that it is good for him to leave because then the Holy Spirit can come. And we discover that our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. He dwells within us. Peter tells us that the church is made up of living stones and that together we form the house of God. Therefore, where two or three are gathered in his name, Jesus is there. The last words Jesus said before he ascended to heaven was this wonderful promise, *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* God is a God who draws near to us.

This is what leads to one of the most precious passages in the Bible. Paul assures us in Romans 8:38-39, *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* This is a good reminder to the person in the cave. It is a good reminder for the person in the “hard place.” Often God doesn’t tell us why we are there. God does not disclose everything to us. At some point, God demands our trust and not our understanding. Take comfort and know that in Christ, God will never let you go. He is with you.

## God is a God who removes the obstacle

What is it that interrupts the construction of the tabernacle? I mentioned that our passage this morning sits in the middle of thirteen chapters that describe the construction of the tabernacle. There is a construction of another kind in Exodus 32 that interrupts the construction of the tabernacle. While Moses is up on the mountain getting instructions from God on how to build the tabernacle, the people are at the foot of the mountain constructing a golden calf. What Israel did in Exodus 32 was a breach of faith and a breaking of the covenant they had agreed to keep with God only some forty days prior to this. What Israel did was so serious that God threatened to wipe out the entire lot and to raise up a new people from Moses. In fact, God later said to Moses in Exodus 33:3 that he would not go with the people of Israel into the promised land. He would not be with them. I can't imagine hearing those words from God. It is a scary thing to hear God say, "Depart from me."

But that is not how the story ends. This passage provides a wonderful picture of how God forgives the sin of the people through the work of a mediator. Moses steps in and intercedes on behalf of the people of Israel and through his work of intercession, God removes the obstacle that stands between them. At one point, Moses is even willing to die in the place of the people of Israel. Peter Enns says that Moses is "shielding an ungrateful people from an end they most certainly deserve . . . The world will not see the likes of this again for many generations."<sup>3</sup> We mentioned that God can be found in the hard place. But if you want to meet with God, you need a mediator to stand in your place and to shield you from the judgment you deserve.

In Exodus 32:21 and verses 30-31, Moses calls what Israel did "*a great sin.*" Let me try to capture the seriousness of their sin. The golden calf stood in competition with the tabernacle. In the tabernacle was a room called "the holy of holies." It occupied the ark of the covenant, which represented the very throne of God. It was a representation of the throne Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6, and with one look cried out, "*Woe is me.*" Only the high priest could enter this room, but once a year and with a sacrifice of atonement for sin. It is a room that communicates the absolute glory of God. Israel was exchanging the very glory of God for a cheap and common trinket of a golden calf. In doing so, they were rejecting God himself. It is akin to what we read in Romans 1:23 when Paul says of our sin, that they "*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*" Peter Enns says, "It is hard to imagine a worse thing they could have done . . . Israel was fashioning a new, false religion."<sup>4</sup> They were coming up with their own way to find God.

God's reaction to the sin of Israel is met with swift judgment. There were 3,000 people who were taken to the sword. God said in Exodus 32:33, "*Whoever sins against me, I will blot out of my book.*" When you hear something like that it ought to cause you to shudder and to say, "who here has any chance of finding God?" Who here is without sin? Then furthermore, God says to Moses that they can go to the promised land, but God is not going with them. In Exodus 33:3 he says, "*but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.*" Keep in mind, this is before the tabernacle was built. In the tabernacle was a way for sin to be atoned for which allowed for a holy God to live among a sinful people. There is no tabernacle as of yet. There is not sacrificial system as of yet. There is no priesthood as of yet. And therefore, there is no hope of God going with them.

And yet, as the story progresses, we discover that God relents of his anger and he goes with them. Why did God go with them? Part of the answer lies in the role Moses played as a mediator on their behalf. Three times he intercedes for them. In Exodus 32:30-34 he says, "*You have sinned a great sin; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.*" And so he prays to God, "*But now if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.*" But God responded to this request by saying, "*Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.*" Moses was incapable of taking their judgment because Moses too was sinful. And so God said, "*I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.*"

This led to one more act of intercession on the part of Moses. A third time, Moses assumes the role of Israel's mediator and he reminds God that if he doesn't go with them, they will never be able to be the blessing that God called them to be to the world. It is in Exodus 33:17 that God says something pretty amazing to Moses. He says, "*This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.*" God agreed to go with Israel because God was pleased with Moses.

Once again, this brings us to Jesus. God the Father, said of Jesus, "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*" Philip Ryken puts it this way, "How could God ever be pleased with someone like me, especially since I know he is not pleased with my sin? The answer is that God is pleased with Jesus, and therefore he is pleased with anyone who trusts in Jesus. The pleasure God takes in us is based on the pleasure he takes in his own beloved Son. This is the only basis on which God is pleased with anyone . . . Jesus is the Mediator. He does for us what Moses did for Israel, only more perfectly."<sup>5</sup> God removes the obstacle that stands between us and God and he does so through Jesus. If you want find God, you need to ask Jesus to be your Savior.



## God is a God who loves to answer our cry.

Moses responds to God's grace by crying out to God, "*Please show me your glory.*" Keep in mind, he had already seen the burning bush. He saw what God did in delivering them from Egypt. He had just spent 40 days at the top of the mountain in the presence of God. And now after interceding on behalf of the people and be assured once again that God will go with them, Moses asks to see the glory of God.

I love God's response to this request. He says to Moses, "*I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But he said, 'You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.'*" And so he put Moses in the cleft of the rock—in the cave—and protected him as he passed by. And Moses was allowed to catch just a glimpse of the back of God's glory. And it says in Exodus 34:8, "*And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.*"

What did Moses see? Well, for starters, he saw a portion of the incredible glory of God. This was the God who was going to go with them. I can't imagine how reassuring and encouraging this must have been to Moses. I read something this week that cautions us to not domesticate God. It was a reminder that "God is not a bigger, better version of you . . . The God of the Bible, by contrast, is a different type of being altogether . . . There is none like him. He is in a class of his own. The difference then is not merely quantitative; it's qualitative. As the medieval theologian Anselm put it, God is someone than whom none greater can be conceived. He is the Perfect Being."<sup>6</sup> If that is who is in the cave with me, I need not fear. I can trust him. There is no limit to his power. He can deliver me from this cave or he will sustain me in the cave. All I need to see is a glimpse of his glory.

The other thing that Moses saw was the goodness of God. In fact, when God passed by him, he announced his name to Moses: "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*" What a wonderful picture of the goodness of God. He is merciful and gracious. Therefore, this is the essence of our joy. You can have joy in the cave if you have God.

Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest minds our country has known, was fired by his

church over a controversy about communion. This was a “hard place” for him, I’m sure. David Hall was a member of the council that met to determine Edward’s fate and this is what he wrote about Edwards, “He received the shock, unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week but he appeared like a man of God, whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good.”<sup>7</sup> That is what it means when it says, “*the joy of the Lord is our strength.*” It is the goodness of God that we see when we see the God and that is what sustains us in the “hard place.”

And so pray the prayer of Moses, “*Please show me your glory.*” Show me your power. Show me your glory. How does God answer that prayer? He answers it by showing us Jesus. The disciples asked Jesus a similar question when they said to Jesus, “*Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.*” Jesus responded by saying, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*” Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” We see the glory of God by keeping our eyes on Jesus. You do that by coming here week after week. You do that by being encouraged by others in the faith. You do that through prayer and through reading the Bible. It is through seeing Jesus that you see the glory of God and you reminded of his power to deliver and sustain you. And you are reminded of his goodness. And therefore, you know that God is with you and even in the cave—the hard place—you can be found singing.

## Conclusion

As we start this series on finding God in the hard place. I want to affirm for you that no matter what “hard place” you find yourself in this morning, God can be found. But he can only be found in Jesus. God tabernacles among us—draws near to us—in Jesus. God removes the barrier between us and God because of our sin through Jesus. He died for us. He is our mediator who brings us to God. Because God is pleased with Jesus, all who turn in faith to Jesus—God is pleased. And if you are in the “hard place” this morning, cry out to God. Ask him to show his glory—his power and goodness—to you. In fact, he already has in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the power that sets you free from sin and death. Jesus is the goodness of God who fills you with joy. Often, it takes the “hard place” for us to see that and to recognize that and to experience that. It is my prayer that through this series, we would see Jesus and we would know that God is indeed with us. And therefore, we can even thank God for the “hard place.” May we see Jesus! Keep your eyes on Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup>Justin Whitmel Earley *The Common Rule* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019) 5

<sup>2</sup>Miles McPherson “My NFL Dreams Were Turning to Dust” in *Christianity Today* March 2019, 87-88

<sup>3</sup>Peter Enns *Exodus: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 588

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 570

<sup>5</sup>Philip Ryken *Exodus* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005) 1033

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Barrett “Don’t Domesticate God with Words” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) March 8, 2019

<sup>7</sup>Jason Meyer “How Jonathan Edwards Helped Save My Ministry” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) March 7, 2019

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. In groups of two or three, share with each other a difficulty or a challenge you are facing. What makes this a “hard place” for you?
2. What causes you to lose sight of God when you are in “the hard place?”
3. Share something from the sermon that you found to be encouraging.



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read Exodus 33:17-23. How do you see the power of God and the goodness of God in this passage? How does this description of God help you in the “hard place?”
5. Read Romans 8:31-39. What makes us “more than conquerors”? What do you find most encouraging about this passage and how does it apply to your situation?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 4:6. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asked to see the glory of God. According to 2 Corinthians 4:6, how do we behold the glory of God? Describe what it looks like for us to do that.
7. Read Exodus 34:1-9. What insight do you gain from the reaction Moses had to the appearance of God? What is true of the one who has the favor of God? How does this help you find rest?



### Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you are taking from your conversation?
9. What is one way you can keep your eyes on Jesus this week?