

## Gregory of Nyssa on Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai

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Gregory of Nyssa, bishop of Nyssa in the area of Cappadocia in Asia Minor, circa 375 A.D.

(He lived c. 335—395 AD) His work was virtually unknown until the 1940s. Gregory gave the first and only sustained critique of the institution of slavery itself made in the ancient world.

Gregory speaks of three stages of spiritual growth: initial darkness of ignorance, then spiritual illumination, and finally a darkness of the mind in mystic contemplation of the God who cannot be comprehended.

**Exodus 33:18** - "And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."

**Exodus 33:20** - "And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live."

**Exodus 33:22-23** - "And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen."

Gregory says God granted Moses' request in what was denied.

God's "passing by" signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide.

This becomes a pattern for disciples, and a precursor to Jesus' declaration "I am the way..." and his call to "Follow me."

"He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view. Therefore, he says to the one who is led, 'My face is not to be seen (Exodus 33:23),' that is, "Do not face your guide." If he does so, his course will certainly be in the opposite direction, for good does not look good in the face, but follows it. What is perceived to be its opposite is face to face with the good, for what looks virtue in the face is evil." - *Life of Moses* 2. 252-4

i.e. both Moses and God would be going in the same direction.

In this way Moses' request was granted - he would not see God face-to-face, which would lead to his desire being satiated and therefore to cease (as well as causing his death). Instead he would see God's "backside," indicating a lifelong following in God's path, in which his desire to see God would never cease but continue to grow.

**Philippians 3:12-14** - "Not as though I had already attained, either were already

perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

**2 Corinthians 3:18** - "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Moses' face shone as he followed God increasingly upward. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says - Genesis 28:12), "he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained. He still thirsts for that with which he has constantly filled himself to capacity."

Similarly, in the Song of Solomon, the bridegroom twice says "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."**(Song of Solomon 2:10-14)**

Why twice?

"For one who has been called to rise in this way can always rise further, and one who runs to the Lord will always have wide open spaces before him. And so we must constantly rise and never cease drawing closer. As often as the bridegroom says "Arise" and "Come," he gives the power to ascend to what is better." - *Gregory of Nyssa, Song of Songs*

"Changed into the same image from glory to glory..."

"No matter how great and exalted that glory may be, we believe that it is less than that for which we still hope. Although she is a dove by what she had achieved, nevertheless, the bride is bidden to become a dove once again by being transformed into something better."

A comment by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury-

"If the Christian life is a journey into God, it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract 'absoluteness' but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls 'goodness', an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight. And because of its limitless nature, this journey is always marked by desire, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object. This is perhaps Gregory's most vivid way of expressing the Christian conviction of God's transcendent freedom and objectivity: faith is always, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend. God is what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future."

-- R. Williams, "The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross"

