

MOSES ON THE MOUNTAIN

Exodus 24. 12-18

2 Peter 1. 16-21

Matthew 17. 1-9

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Who could forget the opening scene in the movie *The Sound of Music*, when Julie Andrews, who played Maria, was singing and dancing on top of the mountain. There she was full of life, free and close to God.

In ancient times, people believed that going to the top of a mountain was a way of being closer to God. I believe that it is still true today. If you have ever done any mountain-climbing, you know that when you reach the top, it is an amazing but humbling experience. You see the vastness of God's creation, and it reminds you how small you are in comparison to God.

Moses went up to the top of Mt Sinai because God called him there. God said, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' So Moses went as he was instructed and stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

While Moses was on the mountain moving closer to God, the Israelites were becoming impatient. They didn't want to wait for Moses to return, and so they put pressure on Aaron to do something. As a substitute for God, the Israelites made a golden calf and worshipped it. To make such a thing was idolatrous. God was not pleased, because the people had moved away from him.

I believe that life today is not totally unlike the time of the Israelites. It seems that people are moving farther and farther away from God. Everyone is in a hurry; and people do not like to wait. Those who are anxious cope by striving to be in control. Increasingly, people are deciding to be masters of their own fate and destiny. Trust is waning; and unfortunately so is faith. For some, the presence of God is becoming a distant reality.

How can we move closer to God? How can we rebuild our trust in God and know that God is real? What mountains do we need to climb? Where is the nearest hill we can ascend to recapture the glory of a loving God?

When Moses reached the top of Mt Sinai, it was covered by a cloud. Moses remained in the cloud for forty days. Moses couldn't see. He was living temporarily in a fog. In other words, Moses had no control of his present condition. He had to trust that God would eventually remove the cloud so that he could find his way back down.

Firstly, we move closer to God by realising that we are not in control. There are simply some things that are beyond our capability to control. An old poem tells of a woman who was walking through a meadow one day. As she strolled along, contemplating nature, she came upon a field of golden pumpkins. In the corner of the field there stood a huge, majestic oak tree. The woman sat under the oak tree and began musing about the strange twists in nature. She asked herself, 'Why would tiny acorns grow on huge oak branches and huge pumpkins on tiny vines?' She thought for a moment that perhaps God had blundered with creation.

Before long, the woman dozed off in the warmth of the late autumn sunshine. She was awakened when a tiny acorn bounced off her nose. Chuckling to herself, she amended her previous thinking. Thank God it wasn't a pumpkin that had fallen from the tree. Maybe God was right after all!

We move closer to God when we let God be God. God is in control of the greater picture and God wants us to trust him in all circumstances. There are simply some things we will never understand this side of heaven. In certain situations, like Moses, we may be asked to live in a cloud and not always be able to see clearly.

Secondly, when Moses arrived at the mountain top, he had to wait six days before God spoke to him. Moses had no choice except to be patient. The impatience of the Israelites caused them to turn away from God and focus on idols. Their impatience not only affected their relationship with God; it disrupted the whole community.

One time a man's car stalled in heavy traffic on a Friday evening, just as the light turned green. All his efforts to start the car failed. Shortly, a chorus of honking rose from the cars behind him. Feeling just as frustrated as the other drivers who wanted to get home for the weekend, the man finally got out of his car and walked back to the first driver. He said to the man whose window was rolled down, 'I'm sorry, but I can't seem to get my car started. If you'll go to my car and work on it, I'll stay here and honk your horn for you.'

Patience is something we all lack. When we lose patience, we are vulnerable. Like the Israelites, we can easily be misled and follow someone or something that moves us further from God. By being patient, we are putting our trust in God and living in faith. Consequently, we are moving closer to God.

Thirdly, while Moses was on the mountain, it was consumed by a cloud. Moses experienced the awesome presence of God as 'the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai'. Since Moses was in the cloud, there were no other distractions and nothing to divert his attention away from God. He had no schedule, nor could he perform any daily tasks. He was unable to see anything, fix anything or solve any problems.

He was focussed only on God and was therefore humbled by the experience (although I would hasten to add that it must have been amazing to experience the glory of the Lord personally!).

A group of businessmen went to a remote mountain retreat for a weekend of leadership training. Expecting graphs, statistics and pep talks, they were more than a little wary when they were asked to trade their notebooks in for shovels. Next, their boss, Mr Clarkson, gave them their assignment for the weekend. He told them, 'I want you to dig a ditch two feet wide and ten inches deep around the perimeter of the cabin.' With those words, he walked back to the cabin and disappeared inside.

At first the group was silent, stunned by the ridiculous task that lay ahead. But soon the silence turned into questioning the purpose of the exercise, arguing that nine inches was close enough to ten, and complaining about having risen to the top of the corporate ladder only to be forced to do manual labour. Finally, Bill, a newcomer to the group, turned to the others and said, 'Who cares why we have to do this. Let's just do it and get it over with.' With those words, the cabin door opened and Mr Clarkson reappeared. 'Gentlemen,' he said as he grabbed Bill's hand, 'I'd like you to meet your new Vice-President.'

Sometimes we are asked to do things that are beneath us. Notice that Moses did not question God about going to the top of the mountain; nor did he complain about the wait. He humbled himself and did as God asked.

Moses had moved very close to God. He moved closer to God by realising that he was not in control. He also moved closer to God by learning patience. And finally, he moved closer to God because he had experienced humility.

Amen.