

The Glorious Presence of God

Today we reach the final verses in our series through Exodus, God's book of deliverance. We looked last Sunday at how God gave instructions for the building of the tabernacle, which would represent his presence during the rest of the journey. And today we'll look at a phenomenon that took place one year and fourteen days after the Exodus, the coming of his glorious presence into the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God.

Chapter 33 onward is the climax of Exodus, because it shows the fulfillment of God's purpose—to come to dwell with his people in a personal relationship. And the closing six verses of the book are “the climax of the climax,” not only to Exodus but to the first two books of the Bible. God had been seeking to re-establish his glorious presence and this personal relationship with his people since it was broken by the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

These closing verses are “semi-poetic” and “almost hymnic” in language, describing something far above and beyond the ordinary (Durham), the glorious presence of God. Follow as I read **Exodus 40:33b-38**:

So Moses finished the work.

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

I have often been surprised by the glorious presence of God. He has made his presence known in powerful ways in unlikely places. Once was in a concrete-block meeting hall at a Baptist campground, where I worked one summer as the lifeguard and maintainer of the water supply and swimming pool. Through a layman's testimony in that worship service God spoke to me about his claim upon my life to seriously answer his call to ministry.

Another time was in my college dorm room, where I received an unexpected visit from a football teammate, who with uncharacteristic concern about his soul, asked me how to be saved. That little dorm room was transformed into a dwelling place of God's glory that would portend many other settings wherein I was to be a witness to the liberating power of the gospel.

I sensed the glorious presence of God in the makeshift worship room of the new church plant we served during our seminary and graduate school years. Sadly, I've

also sensed the dreadful absence of God in a large and lovely sanctuary of a congregation plagued by division and other ungodly influences. God's people determine the sense of his glorious presence.

Lately, it seems God's presence is most glorious when at bedtime I lead Nancy in singing some of the hymns she remembers, despite the ravages of Alzheimer's disease upon her memory.

The cloud of God's presence, which had been with the Israelites from the beginning of the Exodus (13:21) and which covered Mt Sinai (19:16), descended upon the completed tabernacle (40:34). The cloud was the manifestation of the presence of God, the "shekinah glory" entering the tabernacle, the place where holy God would meet his people. The glory of the Lord is his majestic presence, the weightiness and force of his character, and his infinite worth that evokes our wonder and awe and demands our reverent worship and submission. The cloud was a manifestation of God's glory (Hebrew *kabod*), his "unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 6:6) which he shines forth to make himself known, but which we cannot look upon safely in our sinful condition (Hebrews 12:18ff).

As soon as Moses installed the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard, having finished all the work, the cloud and the glory of God's presence descended on the tabernacle (33f). It's as though the Lord couldn't wait to come to live with his people (Motyer). For this very reason the Lord God called and led his people out of bondage in Egypt.

The presence of the Lord in this First Covenant, however, was to be replaced by a presence of greater glory in the Second, the New Covenant. To Moses God promised a greater Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:17f), and this greater Prophet would be the Messiah, the anointed of God, even the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). And when the time came for his incarnation, the angel Gabriel announced to Joseph that his virgin fiancée would give birth to a son who would be called "Immanuel—which means, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

Jesus Christ, as John writes in his Prologue, is the eternal Word made flesh, who "made his dwelling (tabernacle) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The presence of the Lord in the tabernacle was glorious, but not as glorious as the Word made flesh, who came into the world. Wonder of wonders is that holy God wants a personal relationship with his people, and that he has taken the initiative to make a home in our hearts. Christ is our High Priest of a new and better covenant, one that establishes a personal and everlasting relationship with God. Christ is the perfect Mediator, who "suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring (us) to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

In Jesus we see the glory of God, and his glorious, saving presence comes to us. As Jesus said to Philip, who asked to see the Father, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8f). The greatest revelation of God's glorious love was in the cross of Christ. Although Jesus dreaded the sheer horror of his looming suffering, he surrendered to the Father's will for the cross, which he knew would reveal the Father's glorious love and plan for the salvation of all who believe (John 12:27-29).

When Moses prepared the first sacrifice, he could then enter into the glorious presence of the cloud in the tabernacle. What a privilege we have, to enter God's holy presence, made available to us through Christ, whose shed blood has opened for us the curtain of the Most Holy Place! Now we can "approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22). Our sins are forgiven, our guilt is removed, and there is no more separation between us and holy God.

And now through the Holy Spirit, God not only comes near to us but actually comes into us, as Jesus promised (John 14:15ff) and as we experience through the new birth of conversion (John 3:3-8; 1 Peter 1:3), whereby we become new creations of God, the children of God (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 3:1). The Apostle Paul writes about the superior glory of the New Covenant in Christ, contrasting the transforming work of the Holy Spirit with the glory reflected on the face of Moses after being in God's presence (2 Corinthians 3:7-18). Paul says that we see the glory of the Lord, and "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (18). Conversion is purely a work of God's grace, who has "shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," just as he spoke into existence the light of creation (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Moses couldn't enter the tabernacle, just as the priests later could not enter the temple (1 Kings 8:10f), simply because there wasn't enough room for him and holy God to occupy the same place. God's purpose is not only to gain entrance into every believer and every church, but also to fill us with his presence. We are to be so filled with the Spirit that there will be no room left for us, that is, our old sinful nature. When we live in the fullness of the Spirit, there is no room for the old sinful nature to have its way with us. The way to character transformation is not through human resolve but by constant surrender to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The glorious presence of God goes before us. Verses 36-38 are a testimony to the glorious presence of God going before the Israelites on their journey toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Just as the Lord God had a plan when he called Abraham to follow him as the father of his new nation (Genesis 12:1), and just as he had a plan for the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, even so he would go before them, as he goes before us according to his perfect plan.

God, who foreknew us and chose us for his saving grace even before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) has a perfect plan in mind for us. He planned for our

redemption and he also has a plan to lead, guide, protect and provide as we follow him in prayerful, dependent Kingdom living. Even in times when all seems to be falling apart around us and uncertain before us, we can claim the promise of Romans 8:28f, knowing he is directing the events that impact our lives day by day.

Our life may look twisted and chaotic to us, just like the back side of a lovely needlepoint tapestry. But God sees his perfect design on the right side of the tapestry. He knows the design he has for our lives, and as we love him and are called to join his purposes, he's making something beautiful we cannot now see.

As with the Israelites, the glorious presence of God goes before us with his unmistakable guidance. The presence of the Lord God was with them in an unmistakable cloud by day and fire by night (38). There was no way they could miss the guidance of the Lord.

The presence of the Lord is with us to lead and guide us through our circumstances, by the counsel of friends, and the word of God. But also, as with these Israelites, the glorious presence of God goes before us demanding our obedient following. God leads and guides those who trust in and obey him and desire to follow him as his disciples, all the way to Canaan, the Promised Land. We learn that what God requires is our obedience, which is an attitude of the heart. It's our willingness to follow the Lord Jesus in a cruciform life when we learn to die to the old life of sinful and selfish ambition. We are willing to learn what Jesus meant by losing our life that we might find his fullness of life (Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; John 12:25). To walk with the Lord, even thorough the valley of suffering and death, is to know his joy and peace (Psalm 23).

The Israelites were to follow wherever God led them. And "if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out" (36). Sometimes to follow the Lord is to wait, which can sometimes be more difficult than actively following him.

Years ago we were nearing home on the return trip at the end of a vacation in the US. Our children then were about three and a half and five years old, and even though we were only about half an hour from home, began to beg to eat some salty snacks. Nancy warned them that these snacks would make them thirsty, and we had nothing in the car to drink and we definitely would not stop for drinks being this close to home. They would just have to wait until we arrived at home. But the kids prevailed with their entreaties, and so Nancy gave them the salty treats. As predicted, they began to beg us for something to drink, and Nancy told them they would just have to suffer until we got home. Stephanie broke the disappointed silence saying, "Mommy, I know what suffer means. It means to wait!"

To wait is often a suffering experience, when God is silent and circumstances become increasingly difficult and our trials greater. It seems at those times that God has completely forgotten about us. This complaint is raised by the psalmists

(Psalms 10:11; 42:9; 77:9) and God's silence at times is deafening to our spirits and hearts. Yet, at these times we are to wait on the Lord.

The risen Christ told the disciples to wait in the city until they would be clothed with the Holy Spirit, who would enable them to be his witnesses in their worlds (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4f). Waiting is an attitude of dependence, of gaining a sense of the presence, power and leading of the Spirit, who sends us and empowers us for our witness as missional disciples of Jesus.

Want to sense the glorious presence of God? Then visit and praying with someone who's lonely; or sick, in need of encouragement or the Good News of Jesus. He's likely to meet with you in that hospital or nursing home.

Some of us need a new awareness of, response to and infilling of the glorious presence. The glorious presence is not always comforting. Some equate the presence with uplifting and emotionally satisfying experiences, which often only provide only artificial comfort and do nothing to change us. Sometimes the presence deeply disturbs us and shakes us from self-centered complacency and leads us to self-examination and repentance. The only appropriate response to the glorious presence of God is to confess and forsake all known sin (1 John 1:9), repent of our grieving and quenching the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19) and surrender our will to Christ Jesus as Lord, desiring his infilling (Ephesians 5:15-18).

The risen Christ says, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:19f).

The greatest need and challenge I face is to practice God's presence in my life, to trust he's with me and at work in me as my honored, royal guest. It would make more of my life filled with peace and joy, just like I feel when singing hymns at my wife's bedside, as we remember, dementia notwithstanding, that he loves, cares for us and is with us.