

The Presence of God

Two Sundays ago, we noted what happens when people sin, the story of the golden calf, when many of the Israelites fell under judgment for their apostasy, disobeying the 2nd Commandment and worshipping an idol. Moses prayed for the rebellious Israelites, and the Lord was willing to spare the repentant.

In Chapter 33 we find a broken people and their leader, who are dismayed to hear that the Lord is unwilling to continue with them in their journey toward the Promised Land of Canaan. The Lord says that in their stubborn condition it would be perilous for them to be accompanied by the holy God, and so he would send an ordinary angel to guide them on their journey; but he himself would not go with them. Note the response of the people of God in **Exodus 33:12-23**.

¹²Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."¹⁴He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."¹⁸Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."²¹And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and 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; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

There's just no substitute for presence, especially with someone you love and who loves you. Communication technology, like email, long-distance telephone, and Skype and now Facetime, were very important during our years in Belgium when

separated from family and friends by 5,000 or so miles. But reuniting in person is so much better!

Talk with young and even older adults who are struggling with security and self-esteem issues and many will express their resentment or sorrow over the fact that their parents simply were not there for them during their critically formative years. Ambitious and/or wealthy parents who substituted giving expensive toys and other gifts to their children, like smart phones, are nevertheless resented because they were unwilling to give their involvement. The same is true with children from broken or dysfunctional homes, with an absent father or negligent parent.

We're made for personal relationships and depend on personal connections for mental and emotional health. Prisoners in solitary confinement are candidates for insanity. God created us for relationship with him and each other, and no one can be healthy or complete apart from knowing God in a personal way. God called the people of Israel into a personal relationship with himself, to know him and to experience the fellowship of his presence, and made a covenant with Abraham to have a people who would be distinctly his and who would be his dwelling place (Gen. 12:1f; 15:1ff).

Those who were graciously spared God's judgment for the golden calf suddenly realized there's no substitute for his presence. God called them and brought them out of Egypt, across the sea and to Mt Sinai, where God gave them his covenant law and they made their covenant promises to him. But now God's presence was at risk.

When the Lord God said that he would not go with them on the rest of their journey to the Promised Land the Israelites were distressed (2f). This wasn't merely a setback; it meant the end of the road. The Lord God himself had accompanied, protected and provided for the Israelites, and the thought of having to depend on an ordinary angel was frightening, knowing what they were up against. They depended on the Lord God *for deliverance*.

We too need to come to that crucial realization. Apart from the presence of God we're hopelessly lost. Even for mortal life, we depend on the presence of God and his goodness. Jesus refers to this general grace and goodness when he says how the Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Although they wouldn't admit it, militant atheists like Richard Dawkins depend on God's general grace.

Although we know there is immeasurable suffering and gross injustice in this fallen world, we also should recognize that the presence of God mitigates suffering and holds many disasters and untold tragedies in check. Everyone, regardless of unbelief or immoral conduct, knows something of this general grace and longsuffering of a God who doesn't want anyone to perish, but desires everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Hell's the only place where God is not to some degree present, which is why it's a place of absolute hopelessness and unmitigated

suffering and darkness. Those who finally reject God's deliverance through Christ and spurn his saving grace will have chosen hell as the only option to his presence.

Like the Israelites we too depend on God's presence for our guidance and daily grace. He alone is omniscient and, as their psalmist would later put to poetry and music, is our faithful and good Shepherd (Ps. 23:1; 28:9; 78:71). Because the Lord God is omnipotent, omniscient, faithful and loving, we can trust him to guide us in the way we should go. The Israelites had seen God miraculously and faithfully provide water and manna and deliverance from their enemies, and the prospects of moving forward without him were frightening.

What a blessed relief it must have been when the Lord God assured Moses that he would in fact go with them (14)! The Lord promised that he would give them his rest, which is more literally translated "roost." His presence would give them a place to roost, like a bird and her chicks, under his wings of protection and provision. Wherever we are, because God is with us, he enables us to "roost," "to settle down for rest." His presence can give us a sense of peace and settled-ness even in the most unsettling of circumstances.

A personal relationship with God is the distinctive mark of his people. Moses' appeal for the Lord's presence to distinguish his people is all important. Some are happy to have the Lord's presence simply to help them reach their goal of the Promised Land, but otherwise leave them alone. A lot of so-called Christians want to "go to heaven when they die" and are more than happy for God to help them make a good living, keep their kids out of trouble, and help them survive accidents and illnesses. But beyond his general grace and goodness and benefits, they would prefer that God not interfere with their lives.

Just as for the Israelites, the presence of God isn't always comfortable. As Charles Spurgeon said, "God never permits his people to sin successfully." If we truly belong to God, he'll make his errant children miserable until we come back to him for restored fellowship. God's presence comforts the disturbed but disturbs the comfortable. As Paul Scherer says, "no place on earth can be called 'safe in the arms of Jesus,'" and "None of my Sunday school teachers ever told me how dangerous a place that was!"

God allows experiences, including difficulties and suffering, to draw us closer to his love, deeper into his joy, and to produce more of his character in us (Rom. 5:1-5; Jas. 1:2-4). Honest relationships require open communication, even when it's uncomfortable.

With all our electronic communications gadgetry, many seem to ignore live interaction and personal communion, like couples and even entire families, sitting at a restaurant table, all absorbed with their own smart phones and basically ignoring each other. Strong relationships demand communication, even when it's uncomfortable; maybe especially when it's uncomfortable.

Moses desperately needed God's presence, but he also desired an even greater intimacy with him. Moses wanted to see God's full glory, which was not possible. Moses' request came about 1450 years too soon. The Apostle John writes that the Word, Christ, "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). The amazing truth is, that because Christ came to be "God with us" (Matt. 1:23) we are able to see more than Moses saw. In fact, "the Christian child, who looks upon the 'glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,' has a vision which outshines the flashing radiance that shone round Moses" (Maclaren).

We've seen "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Moses' face shone after he had been in the tent of meeting with God, but Paul says that each one of God's people in the New Covenant "reflect the Lord's glory" and are being transformed into the likeness of Christ "with ever-increasing glory" by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). By faith we're more blessed than those who saw Jesus in his physical presence, Jesus says when we see him by faith (Jn. 20:29). We see the glory of God as we see Jesus on the cross and risen from the grave and trust and follow him as our risen Lord and Savior.

The Lord told Moses he would be allowed to see his goodness and hear his name, which revealed his character (19). We can see the perfect character of Jesus as the divine Son of God, who said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). When we see the person and character of Christ in Jesus, revealed to us in Scripture and by the Holy Spirit, we see God's saving glory. The Lord told Moses he would be hidden by his hand in the cleft of a rock when his glory passed by, then Moses could see the glory from behind but would not be allowed to see God's face, the fullness of his glory (21ff). What we are allowed to see also at times is the glory from behind, as God lets us see what his presence has done.

The greatest disclosure of past glory is that of the cross and the empty tomb, what God has done for our deliverance. We can also see his glory through the 2,000 years of church history and what he has done for us in recent years. Sometimes in personal worship but also in our corporate worship, only after it's all said and done do I see traces of God's glory, the work he's done. There are times I have left a hospital room after a time of glorious prayer with a dying saint, and have thought to myself the words of Jacob at Bethel:

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'" (Genesis 28:16f).

Like Moses, our desire should be, not for his material blessings, but for God himself. Throughout our text we find the verb "to know," and it's a word of personal knowledge and experience. The Apostle Paul also had this deep desire to know God in a deeper way, and he realized that the pathway to the deepest, most intimate

knowledge of Christ was not just to experience the power of his resurrection but also “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10). There can be no true intimacy with Christ apart from the way of the cross of self-denial and suffering.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a rising star in a prominent pastorate in Atlanta when challenged to lead in the civil rights movement, which suddenly brought death threats against him and his young family. One night when sleep failed him as fearful thoughts flooded his mind, alone at his kitchen table, the words of an old gospel song gave him comfort and courage:

“No never alone, no never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.” Because the Lord promised to be with him, young King feared to disobey God more than he feared the dangers that lay before him.

God’s people depend on and desire his presence. Have you discovered the joy as well as the dangerous challenge of the presence of the Lord? You can’t Skype, Facetime him or even direct dial him long distance on your phone or send him an email. He’s available only in person, in his awesome, sin-consuming presence that makes an immediate and everlasting change in your life.

His presence means he guides you and delivers you through life’s dangers and provides all your needs, but not all your wants. But you can be confident that his way is best, and that he is always with us, even when it doesn’t look it or feel like it.

The psalmist said: “Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually” (Psalm 105:4). The Lord Jesus has promised to be with me always, so I need affirm that the Lord and his strength are with me, reminding myself that God is with me, whether I realize it or not, whether I feel spiritually full or empty (Matt. 28:20). He seeks me to strengthen me. He’s with me always because he promised. He’s here. He’s with me and he’s with you, always.