

The God Who Is Holy (Part 6 of 6)

The Presence of God is Everything!

Exodus 33

Mark Vroegop

"The LORD said to Moses, 'Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.' When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, 'Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.' " Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward. Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you say 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.' Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" 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." Moses said, "Please show me your glory." 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. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, 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. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.'" (Exodus 33:1–23, ESV)

Today we bring to conclusion the fifth section of our journey through the book of Exodus. We will pick up the next and final section of our study in September after LIVE|13 during the month of August.

We take the month of August every year to dive into some very practical biblical principles and produce a DVD series to be used in small groups. Our aim is threefold: 1) to address some very practical issues in our lives, 2) to encourage you to be engaged in small group, and 3) to provide a short series that might serve as good incentive for people to investigate our church or for you to invite someone to join us.

As I'm sure you have heard, our theme for LIVE|13 is anger. Pastor Andrew Rogers, our Pastor of Soul Care, and I will be sharing the teaching responsibility through this series, and here are the titles for the next four weeks:

- The Reason Anger is Treason
- The Species of Anger
- Don't Get Mad, Get Grace
- Helping Others Cool Down

It is going to be a great series – one that I think will be very practical for an issue with which we all struggle at some level. Anger is dangerous, and God's Word speaks directly about it.

After The Golden Calf

Exodus 33 is a follow-up text after the colossal failure of the idolatry with the golden calf. Last week we learned about the lure and lunacy of idolatry, and we identified the basic attractions connected with worshipping another God. The fall was great, and the consequences were severe. God was angry; the covenant had been broken; people died. Frankly, the future of Israel was very uncertain at this point.

If it wasn't for Moses, the entire nation would have been wiped out, and God would have started over. But Moses was able to appease the wrath of God, and the nation was spared. But there still were consequences. The hard-heartedness of the people caused God to reconsider if he should dwell with them or go with them to the Promised Land. God is not being vindictive; He is legitimately concerned that the people will act treasonously again, and He will have to judge them.

This chapter highlights the beauty and the dynamics connected with God's presence. We see how valuable the presence of God is to the people of Israel and the important role that Moses played in facilitating the nation's experience of God.

As we look at Exodus 33, it will not be hard to see that this is a shadow of what will come in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. So we will also briefly look at the way that He makes the presence of God possible through His favored life. The presence of God meant everything to Jesus, and it cost Him everything.

Eight Implications of God's Presence

As Moses and God interact regarding the condition of the nation and God's glory, we are able to learn some great lessons about the implications of God's presence.

1. God's presence could be dangerous

The text begins with a restatement of God's plan for the nation. The plan is not to stay at Mt. Sinai but to continue to a land "flowing with milk and honey" (v 3). This should sound familiar because we have already heard God say these words before. It was part of the vision for ministry God gave to Moses at the burning bush (see Ex. 3:8), and it was also part of the promise in the deliverance through the plagues (see Ex. 13:5). So God's command to leave the mountain is not surprising and new. This is the mission of the people of Israel.

But this instruction from God is not good news because of what God says after He reiterates the "plan." The statement was shocking: *"Go up. . . but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people"* (v 3). Don't miss the enormity of what God is saying here.

The plan of Exodus has been for God to rescue His people so they could be brought near to God. They were His people and His first-born son. They belonged to Him. And yet God is saying that He will not go with Israel because they are too sinful. God is not being vindictive here; to have a holy God dwell among a rebellious people is a dangerous reality. The people needed to understand that God is not safe. He is holy, but His holiness could be dangerous. For those of you who are C.S. Lewis fans or have read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you might remember what Mr. Beaver said to Lucy: "Of course Aslan isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." Lewis is trying to capture a fundamental truth about God – namely, that His holiness could make God dangerous.

The people heard this news, and they were devastated. In fact, verse four uses the word "disastrous" to capture their view of this response from God.

2. God's presence demands humility

Verse five reiterates the charge and explanation from God. He cannot go with them because He will certainly consume them along the way. Therefore, He calls upon them to humble themselves by removing the ornaments. This may be due to the fact that the people used their ornaments in the construction of the golden calf or the ornaments may have been something which brought pride to them as a people. Regardless, God instructs them to remove these ornaments.

The lack of ornaments would be a continual reminder of how quickly they had rebelled against their deliverer. They would be regularly reminded that God was not like them. Some Old Testament commentators suggest that the people did not wear ornaments for the remaining years of their wilderness journey. Regardless, they would need to embrace humility. God's presence demanded it.

3. God's presence creates worship

Verses 7-11 is a very interesting passage. Moses pitches a tent outside of the camp, and calls it "the tent of meeting." This is not the tabernacle. That will come later. This is something temporary, it is part of the reconciliation process with God's people, and there are lessons that need to be learned. There was a ritual of sorts that happened. Moses would make his way through the camp, the people would stand at their respective tents, he would enter tent of meeting, the cloud would descend, and the people would bow in worship at the tents.

"And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door." (Exodus 33:10, ESV)

Notice that the people are not worshipping together in one common area, and also notice that God is not in the midst of His people in the tabernacle. That will come later. Right now the lesson is simply that there is an appropriate connection between God's presence and worship. When God is near, people bow down.

4. God's presence involves intimacy

Again, keep in mind that this is only a partial vision of what will be expressed in the tabernacle, the temple, and eventually in Jesus. But we see something special here as it relates to Moses. He goes into the tent of meeting, and the Lord meets with him. Verse 11 is a special verse:

"Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent." (Exodus 33:11, ESV)

The phrase "face-to-face" doesn't mean that Moses actually saw the face of God. Other texts clearly indicate that God's face cannot be seen (see Ex. 33:23). Rather, this phrase is a figure of speech to describe the intimacy of Moses' relationship with God. It is a term of endearment and validation of Moses' leadership. God was at a distance, but Moses met with God "face-to-face."

What a stunning sight this must have been! Moses enters the tent, the cloud descends, and the people knew that Moses and God were talking. I can only imagine that there was a level of godly jealousy – a longing to have the same kind of relationship. In Chapter 34 we will see that this kind of encounter will result in Moses' face being lit up with the radiance of God's glory.

The point of all of this is simply that there is something really beautiful and amazing about the intimacy of God's presence. "God with us" is so lovely!

5. God's presence requires His favor

Another theme that emerges in this text is the connection between the presence of God and His favor. Verses 12-13 record a conversation between Moses and God about God's presence, and it seems that Moses is wondering (and maybe advocating) about which of the Israelites are going to

be able to make the trip to the Promised Land. Moses leverages God's favor as the basis of future favor: *"If I have found favor in your sight please show me your ways that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight"* (Ex. 33:13). Don't miss this! Moses' relationship with God was rooted in the favor of God. And any further favor was based upon the original favor. Favor builds upon favor. Grace builds upon grace.

The presence of God begins with God's favor. It is only because of His kindness and grace that He makes fellowship with Him possible. And any growth in understanding of God that results in more favor is only because of His favor. Life is *"from Him, to Him and through Him...to Him be glory forever and ever!"* (Rom. 11:36).

It is also important for you to see that God's favor upon a single person could be applied to a broader community of people. God's favor with Moses began the process of reconciliation between God and the nation of Israel. This is important in light of what we'll see later regarding Jesus.

6. God's presence brings rest

The central feature of Israel's future was the Promised Land and rest. Shalom and some level of national protection from conflict was part of the future hope. We see this in verse 14: *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* The beauty of the Promised Land was more than just a land flowing with milk and honey; it was a place for God and His people to live together. The Tabernacle, the Temple, and the nation of Israel were designed to be a place where God's presence created greater degrees of peace with the hope that one day the whole world will be brought back into harmony with God. There is a connection between God's presence, His glory, and peace.

Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.' "" (Haggai 2:4–9, ESV)

7. God's presence is special

Moses valued God's presence so much that he declared (v 15) *"... if your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here."* Moses had learned a very important lesson in life: going anywhere without God was a bad idea. Having seen the beauty and the power of God, he knew that Israel's survival and success were entirely dependent upon God's power. But even more, Moses knew that there was nothing more wonderful than the presence of God. Therefore, if God was not going, there was no point.

What's more, verse 16 explains that it was the presence of God that made Israel a distinct or special people. They knew that God's love for them was not because of their worth. His presence defined them as a people and was solely due to God's grace and kindness. They were to be a people marked by the presence of God – distinct from all other nations by virtue of the personal presence of Yahweh.

8. God's presence reveals His glory

The final implication of God's presence is the connection to His glory. God grants Moses his request because he has found favor with God (v 17), and then Moses asks to see the glory of God. Why does Moses ask this?

I think it is hard for us to understand why Moses would ask this because we cannot fathom the beauty of what Moses has beheld before. Further, there must have been something incredibly attractive about the glory of God such that Moses wanted to see it. The combination of mystery, grace, and beauty are all combined in the glory of God, and Moses longed to see it. There must something really special about this glory because Jesus prayed in John 17, "Father, I desire that they. . . may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me..." (John 17:24). And so God puts Moses in the cleft of the rock and allows Moses to see the backside of His glory as God passed by (see Exodus 34).

The presence of God reveals the beauty of God's glory – something that is more glorious that we can possibly imagine. So how important is the presence of God? It is everything for Israel. Their entire life centered around the beautiful hope that God was "with them." Their identity, survival, sustenance, power, and success were all dependent upon the personal presence of God. His presence meant everything!

The Promise and Hope of His Presence

Exodus is not just about the people of Israel. It lays a foundation for what is to come in the New Covenant. And it is through the Gospel that we see the promise and hope of God's presence.

When the apostle John talked about the incarnation of Jesus in John 1:14, he said – "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory." So the life and ministry of Jesus was rooted in the personal presence of God among us. God came near through the sending of his Son.

The sending of Jesus was for the purpose of taking away the barrier of sin that stood between human beings and their creator. Jesus died in order to make the presence of God possible with us. Those who receive Christ are washed from condemnation such that that presence of God is possible. Do you know what Hell is? Hell is eternal damnation to the realm where God does not exist or inhabit. It is to be separated from the presence of God for all eternity. And Heaven is the glorious and eternal fellowship with your creator. The New Jerusalem is centered with the presence of God: "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it

light" (Rev. 21:24). In other words, the beauty of what the Gospel does and the beauty of what Heaven is are both the same. The beauty of both is the presence of God.

But there's more. The presence of God is not only about theological position and future realities. There is something very personal and practical right now. For instance, Jesus promised that when He left the earth He would send the Holy Spirit, the indwelling and personal presence of Jesus within all those who are the followers of Jesus. John 14 says the following:

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."
(John 14:26–27, ESV)

It is an unbelievable thought that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. The followers of Jesus have the personal presence of Jesus to help us understand God's Word, to apply it to our hearts, to bring conviction of sin, to give us comfort, and to assure us about the promises of God. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God. When you hear a truth through preaching and it hits you or if you sing a song and words bring tears to your eyes or if you feel led to pray for someone in the hallway today – all of that is the Holy Spirit. It is the beautiful presence of God. What is the purpose of our gathering for worship today? It is to experience the presence of God together.

And what does a lost person need to experience in this assembly? They need to experience the reality of the presence of God.

"But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." (1 Corinthians 14:24–25, ESV)

Finally, there is a wonderful promise in the presence of God. I think there are probably few emotions that are more troubling or frightening than feeling alone. As kids we often fear being alone, but even as adults there is a part of our souls that trembles at the difficulties of life and feeling abandoned by God. This was the essence of what Jesus experienced on the cross when he cried "My God, my God why have You forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

But the hope of the Gospel is that God promises through Jesus that we will never be abandoned. The Bible tells us that Jesus purchased for us the very presence of God, and our spiritual connection to Him is irrevocable! In other words, life may be full of all kinds of hurts, disappointments, challenges, difficulties, and problems. But the trajectory of God's presence in our lives is fixed by the love of God. There is never a moment in life when God has abandoned you.

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress,

or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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."
(Romans 8:31–39, ESV)

The presence and love of God are so important and vital that death or life, spiritual forces or human beings, things happening now or in the future can never separate you from the love of God. The love of God never leaves you, never abandons you, and never forsakes you. So you need not ever wonder if God has left you alone. He never has and never will.

Jesus personally guaranteed that the personal presence of God will never leave us. Ever!

The presence of God is everything – both now and in the future.

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