

Divine Presence

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[0:00] Chapter 33. The words will also be on the screen if you don't have a pew Bible nearby.

! Exodus 33, starting at verse 12 this morning. We'll be reading through verse 17. So Moses said to the Lord, You have been telling me, Lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.

You have said, I know you by name, and you have found favor with me. If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.

Remember that this nation is your people. The Lord replied, My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

Then Moses said to him, If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?

[1:29] What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? And the Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you, and I know you by name.

The word of the Lord. So just imagine that you are alone on a deserted island.

You are out in the middle of the ocean, and there is no shelter, no food, no water, no tools, there is not even a quick trip. What do you need most? Food?

Water? Do you need a knife? Your iPhone? What do you most need? Well, the Israelites, they thought that what they needed most was a God, a God that they could see and touch.

They were out in the wilderness, and they decided to make a golden calf. It was not an easy thing to do. They were desperate, but they figured if they had this God, this idol there with them, then they'd be okay.

[2:41] At least they'd feel better. The Lord, Yahweh, was way off over yonder, way up high on a mountain, up on Mount Sinai.

And Moses, God's representative, the one who was supposed to be looking out for them and taking care of them, he was way off yonder too, up there on the mountain, up on Mount Sinai.

He was there too. So the Israelites, they kind of felt like they'd been left alone in the wilderness. And so they make a God, not a gold, a golden calf, a God who'd be right there with them.

What do we most need in the wilderness? Well, the Israelites were wrong, but they weren't completely wrong. We kind of like to beat up on the Israelites because of the golden calf episode and what they did.

I wonder though, sometimes, if maybe they were actually closer to the truth than we are, sometimes. At least they knew they needed a God there with them if they had any chance of making it.

[3:53] For us, most often, it's just about the stuff and our collection of stuff and having the right things on hand. And God becomes an afterthought.

We figure we need the right gear, the right tools, the right snacks. If we're going to survive in the wilderness, we need food, water, shelter, we need all these things, a knife, a flare, a weapon. And oh yeah, maybe God too.

God's maybe an afterthought. God. The Israelites made a false God, a fill-in God. It was a really, really bad thing to do.

At least though, they had enough spiritual sense to know they needed a God. They knew they wouldn't be able to make it out in the wilderness on their own.

What do we most need in the wilderness? That's the question that our text this morning addresses. And it's not material things and it's not our own ingenuity and it's not some fill-in God, a God of our own making.

[4:58] No, it's the presence of the Lord. And Moses, he knew it. Moses didn't know everything. He didn't get everything right. But he knew this, that what the people most needed there in the wilderness was not food or drink.

As great as the manna and the quail were and the water from the rock, they were great to have, but no, that wasn't the main thing and not shelter either. And for Moses, not even angels would do. The presence of the Lord himself, it's the only thing. Moses knew it. It's the only thing that can ensure our survival. The Lord's presence is what we need most. A couple of times in this series, we've come back to Psalm 36.

Psalm 36. Psalm 36 says, O Lord, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love. Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. We've got the cleft of the rock in the shadow of God's wings today. They feast on the abundance of your house. You give them to drink from your river of delights. And then the main verse, for with you is the fountain of life.

[6:11] Moses, he knew this. He knew this. The life-giving power of God's presence. And that's why Moses has this one big concern, this one big question.

Will he or won't he? Will he or won't he? Go with them. Be present with them. There in the wilderness. There on their journey through the wilderness toward the promised land. That's the big question hanging out there. Will the Lord go with them or not? He'd rescued them from Egypt, took on the most powerful empire in that time in history, and he won, and he delivered them from slavery, and he gave them their freedom.

And they weren't all that grateful for it, and they complained a lot, and they made a golden calf. It was kind of like telling God they didn't need him.

They didn't want to wait for him. They didn't want to wait on him. They didn't want to do things his way. They had a new God, one they could see and touch. They made a replacement God, a fill-in God, and the Lord burned with anger.

[7:24] God's wrath against sin and evil is a real thing, and God's wrath was burning there in the wilderness. We talked about it last week, actually, how he seemingly was ready to kind of have them, or let them just kind of have their way, and let them go on, kind of on their own, and try things without him.

Here's from the beginning of chapter 33, just a bit before our reading for this morning. He says, Then the Lord said to Moses, Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants.

And then he says, Verse 2, I will send an angel before you to drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.

Given the situation, it seems like this is just not going to work. God and these people going together, it just didn't seem like it was going to work.

God and his holiness dwelling among, with the stiff-necked, idol-worshiping people, unrepentant. There just seemed to be no way it would work. And the next thing we read about is the people repenting.

[8:49] They do show some sorrow and some remorse. And then we read about Moses going to the Lord, approaching the Lord on behalf of the people, and that's our text for this morning.

It's really this extraordinary interaction, this extraordinary conversation between Moses and the Lord. Last week we saw in chapter 32 how Moses interceded and called on God to relent. And God did relent. Now here he goes to the Lord again. Moses goes to the Lord, and he's thankful for the Lord's mercy, but now he's thinking about the journey ahead.

And he asked the Lord, who are you sending with us? And the Lord said, I'll send an angel with you. Did you catch that?

He said, I'll send an angel with you. But to Moses, that wasn't good enough. Moses knew that wouldn't do. An angel was good, but not good enough. So Moses, being very bold, he says this, remember that this nation is your people, Lord.

[10:02] Moses here is invoking the covenant, right? He brings up the covenant. God had said it time and again. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

But now there's a question mark. The people have now broken covenant with God, so there's this question. It's hanging out there. Will he or won't he?

Will God go with them or not? They've been unfaithful. Will he stay with them or not? And it's interesting how the Lord responds.

It sounds like good news, and it is good news, sort of. Verse 14. The Lord replied, my presence will go with you.

I will give you rest. It's good news. It's good news. It's just, it's just that the you in this verse is singular. That doesn't really show up in our English translation, because we can't tell really if it's plural or singular in English, but if you go back to the original Hebrew, it's clear the you is singular. [11 : 11] This is God talking to Moses, and he's specifically talking about Moses. My presence will go with you, Moses. And we saw last week how God considered, seemingly considered starting over with Moses, right?

You know, the people had built the golden calf. They worshiped it. The Bible says they indulged in revelry, kind of a lot like the days of Noah. And then seemingly God considered just kind of starting over with things like he did with Noah.

He'd start over with Moses and build a new nation through Moses. And now here it seems like God may still be thinking along those same lines.

He's promised to send an angel with the Israelites, and so he's not going to destroy them. In fact, he's going to help them. He's going to send a powerful angel along with them, but he's only really going to be personally present with Moses.

And fair enough. But for Moses, it's not good enough. The angel offer was good, but not good enough. The promise to go with him individually, personally, wow, that would have been a pretty sweet arrangement for Moses, but Moses wanted more.

[12 : 26] And so he says to God, he comes to God and says, if your presence does not go with us, you don't send us up.

Do not send us up from here. So it's an extraordinary conversation, interaction here. People don't talk to God like this, but Moses, he did. He could have accepted God's special favor on him, individually, personally, and then just kind of walked away.

He could have done that, but he didn't do that. He stood in the gap. Again, as a type of Christ, he stood in the gap. He went to bat for the people, and God listened.

And Moses interceded very boldly on behalf of the people, and God responded favorably. God's answer comes in verse 17.

Moses said, if your presence does not go with us, then don't send us up from here. And then the Lord says to Moses, I will do the very thing that you have asked, because I'm pleased with you, and I know you by name.

[13 : 36] So this is it. This is it. This is the answer that Moses was waiting for and seeking. This is the thing Moses knew that they needed, not just God's power, not just God's provision, that angel could have helped with a lot of that.

What Moses wanted was God himself. What Moses wanted was God himself. That's what he knew they needed most, the presence of the Lord on their journey.

And the Lord says yes. Yes, thank you for asking. Yes. He accepts Moses' intercession, and gladly so.

He's pleased by it. He's pleased that Moses did what he himself put Moses in that position to do, and he's pleased to respond and show mercy and do exactly what is in his nature to do.

His nature. God's nature. To address any lingering questions about God's nature here, the Bible goes on in short order to really lay it out for us and make it clear to us.

[14 : 43] God just gives it to us. Just a few verses after our reading for this morning, just at the beginning of chapter 34, and he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, The Lord, the Lord.

Who is he? The compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the wicked or the guilty unpunished.

So Moses, he boldly interceded on behalf of the people. At one point, he even said to God, Go ahead and blot my name out of your book and forgive the people.

He boldly interceded, risked, sacrificed a lot for these hard-hearted people, and God accepted his sacrifice. God is pleased to accept his sacrifice and forgive wickedness, rebellion, and sin, to

maintain his love that endures forever.

And at the end of the day, God in his mercy went with his people. He went with them. The Lord's presence was with them through the wilderness on into the promised land.

[15 : 54] And the good news of the gospel is that we too have a mediator. We too have a mediator. We too have a God who in a special way goes with us. Reverend Stan Mast, he's a retired minister in the CRC, he had a great way of describing this.

So just let me share a little bit from Reverend Mast. He says, What kind of God is this? Well, not the golden calf of pagan religion, the crude creation of your hands, not the unmoved mover of pagan philosophy, the sophisticated creation of your mind, not a God who can't think or feel or talk.

No. The God of the Bible is very personal with deep thoughts and powerful emotions and life-changing words. In his holiness, he cannot stand sin. In his justice, he must punish it.

In his faithfulness, he keeps his promises. In his grace, he forgives sin. And in his deep love, he provides a mediator who will stand between himself and his sinful people.

Back and forth, the conversation goes. And he's referring to this here in Exodus. God speaking to Moses face to face as a man speaks to a friend. Moses daring to plead the case of God's sinful people in the face of God's righteous anger, born of wounded love.

[17 : 23] Moses is a mediator par excellence, a powerful picture of Jesus Christ, hundreds of years before Jesus came. That's the whole point of the story.

And of the whole biblical story, the personal God who has entered into a covenant with his people has sent a mediator to intercede for them when they break his covenant. Moses gives us a preview of that perfect mediator, pleading for sinners, putting them before himself, offering his life for theirs, not quitting until every one of them gets the blessing God has promised.

Moses was not the perfect mediator as his temper tantrum coming down from the mountain demonstrated. The perfect one would come down to another mountain and die.

And then leave from another mountain with these familiar words, Behold, I am with you always at the very end of the age. It's that most precious promise from Jesus.

He gives us the great commission and then he leaves us with a great promise. Be with you always at the very end of the age. I'll never leave you nor forsake.

[18 : 47] In Christ, he died to bring about this reconciliation, to reconcile unholy sinners to a holy God. It's really because of that great sacrifice that God's promise to Moses becomes God's promise to us all.

It's plural and it's singular. He's with us and he's with you, each one of you, individually, personally, each day, each moment.

Lord's presence with us even in the wilderness when things are hard, especially in the wilderness. God is with us. Emmanuel. In fact, the thing we need most is the thing he most wants to give himself, is present.

We have a God who comes near, who comes among, who walks with. That's the message of Christmas. That's the message of Pentecost.

That's the message of the tabernacle. And really, that's the message of Scripture as a whole. The thing we need most is the thing God most wants to give. And that's what God is communicating to us through the sacrament here.

[20 : 10] Who? He's communicating, I am here, I am with you, take and eat, my presence will be with you. My presence will go with you into that new job or into that new school or into that operating room.

My presence will go with you when you're lonely, when you're sad, when you feel like you're not enough. You will never be alone. My presence will go with you even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Fear no evil. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I promise. Let's pray together. Father, as we wrap up this series on Exodus, we want to pause and thank you for the way you've shown up and been present to us through it, through your word, through your spirit bringing us these wonderful words of life.

And as the rain doesn't fail to nourish the soil, so may your word not return to you void, but have for us a lasting effect, a life-giving effect. All this we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.