

God's Presence and Glory

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- [0 : 0 0] One of the great sadness, I think, with this whole pandemic, apart from the fear of suffering and death around the world, but particularly for us in Melbourne and now in Australia as well, is the separation that it has enforced between loved ones.
- I'm sure some of you, many of you would have experienced at least one or two of these examples, but if you've had someone, a loved one in hospital, let's say, or in aged care or overseas and now even interstate, all these lockdowns and border closures has made it difficult for you to see one another.
- Things we used to take for granted, we now have to plan and even when we plan, there is no guarantee that it will happen.
- What's more, if you so happen to breach the rules, the government makes you feel like a criminal just because you want to see your children or your parents or your grandparents.
- Basic human things like that now are so difficult. But community, through this whole experience, we've realized, haven't we, that community is a human need.
- [1 : 2 0] Being present with those we love, particularly when we're struggling in life or having great stress, is a thing of great value. And in our chapter today, in the two chapters, I think that's a similar theme that we're going to see.
- Moses is asking God, in the light of the debacle that is the golden calf, will his presence follow his people? Will God continue to be with them?
- Now, remember where we left off last week, God had agreed not to destroy the Israelites. But in verse 33, he told Moses to lead the people to the promised land. But all he promised was that his angel will go with them.
- And now here in verse 3, he spells out the implication. He says, 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.
- He'll send his angel, but he himself will not go. So this conversation with God and Moses continues. God still has this dilemma that he's promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bring his people into the land.
- [2 : 3 3] But also the sinfulness of the stiff-necked people that are his people may cause him to destroy them en route. So instead, he says, God's angel will go.
- My angel will go instead. Now, at the news of this, the people mourned. But it's almost a bit like the naughty child, you know, who is crying because he's done wrong. You know, he knows that he's wrong, but he still wants to have his mom or dad hold him in their arms.
- It's a bit like that, isn't it? And so God tells them in verse 5 that, okay, all right, he'll have to think about it a bit more carefully. He asked them to strip themselves of their ornaments and await his decision.
- In the meantime, Moses is summoned into God's presence to continue this conversation. And so what we have in verses 7 to 11 is a description of a tent of meeting that is outside the camp.

This is different to the tabernacle, which we've been looking at. But this is a temporary tent to which God summons Moses whenever he would like to have a conference with him.

[3 : 40] And so when the people saw Moses enter it, they would stand outside their own tents and await the outcome. But what I find so amazing in this whole section is that of verse 11.

For there, we find that the Lord would speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend. This is such a privilege, such a unique thing that only Moses gets to experience.

And so in verses 12 to 23, we have a record of this conversation, almost as it were, between God and his friend.

Now, I'll say this a bit later again, but unique as it is with Moses, this is something actually now each of us, if we are in Christ, we get the opportunity to have as well.

Even though we're not a prophet, even though we're not anyone special as it were. But here, Moses begins with this plea. You've been telling me, lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.

[4 : 47] 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.

You can almost sense Moses tugging at God's heartstrings here, can't you? Moses is pleading for himself as a leader, saying, God, don't forsake me.

If you want me to lead them, then you need to guide me. And then he adds, remember that these are your people. Don't disown them. Don't send them forward without being with them.

Well, God replies in verse 14, All right, my presence will go with you and I will give you rest. And 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? What else would distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? Now, Moses' point here is this.

[5 : 49] Israel cannot claim to be God's people unless he was with them. God's presence accompanies those who are his people. Otherwise, Moses says, we are no different from any of the other people.

We can claim to worship God. Anyone can claim to worship God and even do so genuinely. But only when God chooses to be with them can they rightly claim to be his people.

And so on hearing this, God agrees, not because of the people's faithfulness, but rather because of Moses' faithfulness. God's favor, you see, is on Moses himself.

And that is the thing that inclines him to maintain his presence with Israel. Now, of course, we will see again aspects of this which makes Moses a type of Jesus.

He's a shadow of who Jesus will be for us. Because as Christ's body now, we too have God's presence, not because of what we've done, not on our account, but because of what Jesus has done.

[6 : 56] That God has found favor on his son. And we get this, don't we, in the New Testament? Because if you remember, at his baptism, Jesus was called by God.

This was the actual thing that God said. When Jesus was about to be baptized, God called out from heaven and said, This is my son in whom I am well pleased. The son is really calling him by name.

And so likewise, here we see Moses being described in the same way, isn't it? God says to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you, and I know you by name.

And so with that, we move to the next point on the outline, and that of God and his glory. Moses, having heard this, in verse 18, is so bold then to ask, Show me your glory.

And God replies in the following way, verse 18 and 19. I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you. I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.

[8 : 03] I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. And here, I think, is where we begin to see how the many aspects of what we've been talking about of God comes together.

Moses asked to see God's glory, but God, in turn, speaks of his goodness passing in front of Moses. Now, incidentally, the word presence in the Hebrew is literally the face.

So if you're in someone's presence, you're in someone's face. All right? To be before the face of someone, or to pass in front of someone. So for God to have his goodness pass in front of Moses is to have his goodness come before Moses' presence.

God's presence and God's goodness is the same thing. Besides, when his goodness passes before Moses, God also says that his name is proclaimed in Moses' presence.

And so, as his name is proclaimed, we find in the next sentence that what is declared is God's character. So we see his presence, his glory, his name, his character, all of that coming together in the one act.

[9 : 20] God's sovereignty to bless who he desires to bless is part of his character. His grace to have compassion on whom he has compassion. That's also part of his character. All of that comes when his name is proclaimed, when his glory is revealed, when we are in his presence.

And later on, when we go to chapter 34, verse 6 and 7, we see the exact same thing happening there as well. And finally, it also means that with God's presence, Moses comes face to face with God's glory.

His glory is a holy glory. And so, that's why, even though Moses has found favor in God's eyes, he's still not able to see God face to face.

Verse 20, But you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live. No one that is sinful, that is, who sees God face to face will live.

Instead, God has to accommodate to Moses. Verse 21, There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.

[10 : 29] Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back. But my face must not be seen. And that's a bit strange because we just heard that Moses was talking to God face to face, wasn't it?

And yet now he can't see his face. So, what's going on here? It's almost as if, you know, he is almost in God's presence, but not quite. He's able to see God, but really only the back.

That's just sort of, you know, that finely tuned balance, isn't it? Of being in God's presence, but not fully because of human sinfulness. And it's similar, isn't it, to all the stuff that we've been looking at over the last few weeks and months with the tabernacle.

God desires to dwell with his people, yes, but then there is still a sense of, but not too close. So, here, God will pass in front of Moses, but only by shielding him, covering him.

I tried to think of an analogy, and sort of the one that I came with was the analogy of the sun, S-U-N. We all know, I don't know whether, I've always been told that I'm always vitamin D deficient, so I need to spend more time in the sun.

[11 : 43] But yet, at the same time, when I'm in the sun, people also say, oh, don't forget to put on the sunscreen, because then, you know, you need to protect yourself from skin cancer and UV exposure. But when you apply the sunscreen, of course, then the vitamin D doesn't work, does it?

Because, you know, you need to be exposed. So, there's this whole, you know, I need to be in the sun, but then I need to, and particularly when, you know, with my sort of, I'm always being told, put a cap on, put this on, but I need the vitamin D, and oh, no, put this on.

So, it's a bit like that, isn't it? We desire to see God's glory, we desire to be in God's presence. Moses did, and his people did, and yet, God's holiness sort of, you know, puts a bar against that, because they were not, they were not holy themselves, they were sinful.

And that's why God's having all these second thoughts, isn't it? About going with his people, because this stiff-necked people, you know, guaranteed, would somehow sin again, and that would risk God consuming them with his holiness.

And God didn't want to do that. He loved them, and yet, so desires to be with them, and yet, because of their sin, they put themselves at risk of being consumed by God.

[12 : 53] Well, we're going to look more at God and his holiness next week, because that's in the last seven verses of chapter 34 and chapter 40 as well. But next, in chapter 34, from verse 1, we see that God's presence also means continuing to keep his law, having to continue to keep his law.

Yes, they've broken it in the golden calf, but thanks to Moses, the people now have a second chance to do this again. And so what we read, or what you will read if you read chapter 34, is that a large part of it is just simply the re-giving of the law.

So God, in verse 1, instructs Moses, chisel out two stone tablets like the first one, blank, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning and then come up to Mount Sinai.

Present yourself there on the top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain. Not even the flocks or herds may graze in front of the mountain. And if you go back to chapter 19, that's very similar instructions that God gave to Moses the first time around.

And then if you look at the rest of the verses up to verse 28, it's very much a summary of what's already been given in chapters 20 to 23. The order is slightly different.

[14 : 05] It's almost reversed, actually. I don't know why. But the contents are similar. So we'll fly through them. But in verses 11 to 17, there are instructions about God driving out the nations, similar to what's in chapter 23 and verse 20.

So it includes warning about not worshipping idols, not making a treaty with them. Then in verses 18 to 26, there are laws about the three annual festivals, which corresponds, again, if you look back at chapter 23 in verses 14 to 19, the three festivals where people had to go up to Jerusalem.

And then even down to the very detail of that puzzling instruction, isn't it, of verse 26, not to cook a young goat in its mother's milk. It's repeated twice in Exodus, and I still don't know why it's there, okay?

But it's repeated. It's almost suggesting that God is just re-giving the law down to the very fine details. And tucked in amongst this is the law about the Sabbath rest, which again we find in chapter 23.

And then surprisingly, everything else in chapter 21, 22, and 23 are omitted. But then we come to verse 27 of chapter 34, which we read, Then the Lord said to Moses, Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.

[15 : 25] Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water, and he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. Now it's only two words right there at the end, Ten Commandments, but I think it appears there because God actually wrote out or gave to Moses the Ten Commandments again, even though it's not recorded again word for word in chapter 34.

So I think what seems to have happened is that God gave the law to Moses from start to finish all over again, spelled out in full. And what I think it shows is just how important this law is to God.

It's not negotiable if they wanted His presence. After all, it was their breaking of the law that nearly cost them God's presence in the very first place.

And so the people had to continue to take God's words seriously, even though they were a stiff-necked people, and God knew it. God wasn't going to release them from the requirement to keep this law.

If they wanted His presence, they had to keep His law, and if they kept His law, then they would be keeping what reflects His character. And that is the last point on the outline, and that is, when we have God's presence, we also have God's character.

[16 : 52] And that, in chapter 34, is encapsulated in verses 5 to 7. If you read those verses, I would consider them to be one of the most important verses in Exodus, if not the most important.

And so here we have Moses carrying those two tablets up to the mountain in a blank slate, and the very first words that God speaks as He passes in front of Moses are these words.

And so He says, The Lord, the Lord. That's His way of proclaiming His name. Yahweh, Yahweh. And then, He declares His character. 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 guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. It's interesting, isn't it, that God speaks it, but He speaks it of Himself almost in a third person, like a declaration.

Something, you know, that perhaps they can then take and repeat and sort of put up on the wall or something as a plaque or something, even though they probably can't do that. But it's a sort of declarative statement, is it, of His own character.

[18 : 08] And so, if you ever wanted a concise summary of God's nature, then this would be it, I think. A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love, even forgiving wickedness and rebellion and sin, the very things that Israel was guilty of.

Now, we hear all these and we love all those things, don't we, of God's character. And yet, that's where it comes in verse 7, and yet, He does not suppress His holy character either, His holiness.

For He has to punish the guilty, even visiting the consequences of their sin to the third and fourth generation. And so, I think often we like the idea of God's presence, don't we?

We want God to be with us, to comfort us, to tell us what to do, to bask in His glory. And yet, what do we think about that other aspect of His character, His holiness?

Because we can't have the first without the second, can we? We cannot have a God that we just fashion out of our own imagination because that would be idolatry.

[19 : 21] No, if we desire to have God's presence, then we need to desire all of His character, His unchanging character. And with that, also comes a love for His word, His law, and to abide by it.

So, if that's what God's presence means, ask yourself, do you still want this presence? Do you still want Him to be with you? Not just gracious, but holy, and just, and righteous?

Well, the psalmist says in Psalm 84 and verse 10, better is one day in your courts, O Lord, than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my holy God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

I know that for many of you, you do take great comfort in God's presence. Your faith in Him is strong, particularly for some of you who have been living alone through this pandemic.

It can often feel lonely and isolating. And so, you take great comfort in knowing that God is with you. And that's the truth, isn't it? Because in Christ, we do have God's presence all the time.

[20 : 40] We have the gift of His Spirit comforting us and counseling us. But we have the Holy Spirit, don't we? And so, He has God's nature too, that when He's with us, yes, He's gracious and compassionate, but He's also righteous and just.

And in the New Testament, we are assured of much more because God no longer is in our presence as it almost were, like He was with Moses, having to cover with His hand to shield Moses in order to pass in front of us.

No, God doesn't need to do that anymore because we are covered by the blood of Jesus. And so, we can come boldly into God's presence, face to face, as it were. And so, as a result of that, God's Spirit dwells with us in person without any qualification.

And in that high priestly prayer that Jesus prayed in John, when He prayed for all His disciples, what we see there is that He promised not just God's presence with us, but more than that, our presence with the Triune God.

He prays that we may all be one and in Him even as He is in the Father. That is, when we are in Christ and Christ is in the Father, we are ushered spiritually into God's heavenly presence.

[22 : 06] We are invited into the very heart of God's eternal presence. And we may not feel it, we may not see it, but that's what happens when we are Christians.

We are in God's presence. We are in the very presence of God. As we gather as a church, that happens. So even right now, just let that soak in.

We are in God's presence. When we pray in the name of Jesus by His Spirit at home, by ourselves even, we are in God's presence.

And further, this glory that Moses wanted to see, well, Jesus gives it to us as His church, doesn't it, when He says that right at the end. So, what a privilege it is, isn't it, for us to be God's people, to be in His presence because of Jesus.

But of course, I keep repeating myself again and again, if we are in God's presence, then we are also in the presence of glory, in the presence of holiness.

[23 : 10] He will give us His word and He will require of us the demands of His character. Now, it's almost sometimes, if you think about it, many children would like their parents around, don't they?

Particularly around exam times when it's stressful. They want the parents to be home, to, you know, give them the meal, cook the stuff when they need it, kind of thing, you know, take them around when they're stressed to get from one place to another.

But of course, having your parents' presence is not just one way, is it? Because when you have your parents with you, they will also remind you to go to bed early because it's good for you, to be disciplined to do your work, not to leave your mess lying around.

And often, you know, as children, I was that way too, you know, we want our parents to do all that we want them to do. But then we're not too happy when their presence also means they want us to do what of us, what we ought to do.

And that's the same way with God, isn't it? We like the bit where God promises to do what we want Him to do. But we need to remember that when God is in our presence, or we are in His presence, then He will also require of us what He wants of us.

[24 : 30] And that is to live holy lives obedient to His Word. We can't have just the one and not the other. When we're in His presence, He will ask us to be forgiving of others, to be gracious, to exercise self-control, to follow Him rather than the world.

That is what it means to be in His presence. And so I think that is our challenge, isn't it? To humbly accept that. Not just the good things that we like, but the holy things which we may not like because of our fallen nature.

but let's, with God's help, pray that we might desire all of God when we come into His presence. Let's pray. Father, thank You that we are able to enter Your presence in Christ Jesus and not be consumed because of our sin.

Thank You that Your Son gives to His church the glory which You gave to Him. Help us to reflect that glory in the way we live holy and obedient lives. and as we do, comfort us to know Your presence is with us until we get to life's end and then we will truly be in Your presence physically for eternity.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.