

The Face of God

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, it would be good if you turn to page 78 in your Bibles. We're nearing the very end of our Exodus sermon series. And I just want to make sure that David's earphones are off at this point.

And we won't have any distraction that way. I want to just say a word about Wednesday night's meeting that we had as a vestry as we look at this passage because that meeting was a very important meeting in the life of St. John's.

It's the type of meeting that will bless us for a long time to come in a number of ways. And I say that partly because it was a powerful expression of the unity of God and of his people.

It's a unity that comes from being humbly faithful to God's word together. And in doing that, God brought us together. That's a gift from God and it will be a source of great strength to us in our journey that is to come.

I'm very grateful, and I'm sure you are as well, for the prayers of many people leading up to that meeting as well because God worked very powerfully through the faithful people in prayer, some of whom came very early in the morning, some late at night, some all through the day.

[1 : 23] God used those prayers to great effect. It was a meeting Wednesday night that was long and a sacrifice for probably many, especially those with small children who had babysitters, for those who had a long day of work and stayed.

But at the same time, I think most of you felt a deep sense of God's blessing in that meeting. And probably the best way to describe that blessing is that there was a strong sense of God's presence here at St. John's, here among his people.

And I think that that experience is a wonderful reminder of what is always true. Even though we don't always have such a strong experience of his presence, it is always true that because of the gospel, God is with us through Jesus and by his Holy Spirit.

And I think that experience that we had on Wednesday night is a very good way into our passage from Exodus because this passage is about the gift of God's presence with his people.

It is about the need for prayer and it is about the need for repentance as well. The last two weeks we saw the reason for this.

[2 : 43] Two completely contradictory things have taken place as we've gone through the book of Exodus. We saw two weeks ago the beauty and the goodness of God's creation, symbolized in the beauty and goodness of the tabernacle.

This is the place of God's presence with his people. It reveals intimacy with God just as Adam and Eve knew God in the Garden of Eden. But then last week we see this awful, horrendous rupture of that relationship.

We saw the sin of the golden calf, exchanging the truth of God for a lie and rebelling against him. And that really corresponds to Adam and Eve in the Garden, falling for the lie of the snake as they rebelled against God.

And like Adam and Eve, that sin corrupts Israel's relationship with God. The newly formed people have been infected by sin.

And so that's the great problem that faces God, Moses, the people in these two chapters. How can God possibly dwell with a sinful people?

[3 : 55] Well, back in chapter 32, in verse 9, we see that it's actually impossible for sinful people to be in the presence of God.

And that's why God says he will destroy the people and he will make Moses a new nation. He'll be another Abraham. But Moses prays.

He intercedes. And God makes him a mediator. So if you were on page 77, to go right to the right-hand bottom corner of that page, you'll see in verse 32 that Moses says this.

In other words, he wants to be a substitute for his people.

And that's looking ahead to the truth of what Jesus will do. But God doesn't accept that offer because Moses is not the sinless son of God that God gives out of love for the world.

[4 : 54] So there's another solution that comes right away after in verse 34. And that is that God will send an angel to go before them to the promised land. But the sin will still be retained.

And worse, the presence of God will not go with the people. Look at the next page, chapter 33, verse 3. I'm giving your hand to work out as you move along here.

But verse 3 says, Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you, God says. I will not go among you, lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.

That means the tabernacle will not be built. It means God will not live with his people as they go to the promised land. And that's why in verse 4 there is a powerful response by the people.

You see there that they know in their hearts that this is a disastrous word. And so they mourn. And no one puts on their ornaments, a sign of repentance and grief.

[5 : 58] There's a real grief here because of their sin and their ruined relationship with God. And that ruined relationship is illustrated in verse 7, where Moses takes a tent.

It's not the tabernacle. He pitches it outside the camp, far off from the camp. And he calls it the tent of meeting. And that's where God comes. It's not in the middle of the camp of Israel.

It's not the place where God meets with his people. And so perhaps for here for the first time, the people realize the full seriousness of their sin.

It actually means separation from God. It means not living with God. It means they can never know the intimacy with God that that tabernacle, the beautiful tabernacle, will symbolize.

So clearly there is a need for rescue. There is a need for a mediator. And that's what God has been making Moses into. And so if you look down in verse 13, Moses prays for his people.

[7 : 04] He starts by saying, Now therefore I pray thee. And I think this is very instructive for us today. Many of you have been praying for the people of God these last few weeks.

And I think this is a gift of the challenge that we're facing as a church, that we're actually being called into prayer. So many of you have been interceding for God's people.

You've been praying for unity. You've been praying for protection and for guidance. And this is the same type of ministry that Moses was about here. Moses was called into it because he was in favor with God.

And we are called into it because God has given each of us favor with God as well through our Lord Jesus Christ. And as we see in Moses, that ministry of intercession is crucial for the people of God. It's not something that we have to achieve or attain after long, hard work. Intercession is something that we have as a gift because Jesus has given us favor with God.

[8 : 10] And so this passage ought to encourage us to pray for our brothers and sisters in their need in other churches as we will this morning. We are called to pray for one another as we face great challenges.

Well, the content of Moses' prayer is very clear in verse 13. He prays for two things. He prays that he might know God, show me thy ways that I may know thee.

And then he prays for God's presence among his people. And that's when he says, consider too that this nation is thy people, you know, the people that you are present with.

So even though they have sinned, Moses asked God to have compassion on his people and to come and dwell with them. Well, God answers in verse 14 by saying, my presence will go with you.

Now, the problem is that's a singular you. He's talking to Moses. The people of God are not mentioned. And so Moses responds, if you notice in verses 15 and 16, he responds by saying that it's not worth going anywhere if God is not with them.

[9 : 20] And that is a call for us too. It's not worth going anywhere, any direction, make any decisions that are big, like the one we did Wednesday night, unless God goes with us.

And this is Moses' prayer. It is only God's presence, Moses said, that makes the Israelites distinct from all the people on earth.

This is true for us. The only thing that makes us different from the world is that God has so filled you with his Holy Spirit that you have faith in Jesus Christ and you live for him.

You live for his gospel. That's what makes you different. That's why you have a different ruler. You have a different priority and motivation in life. You have a different destination.

And God is actually forming you to be a different person because God lives in you by his Spirit through faith in Jesus. So we as a church must always be aware and know that the living God lives in us and amongst us.

[10:25] That's why opening the word of God, to hear sermons preached on God's word, to study God's word, to read it on your own, is a gift to us.

Because God speaks by his living word. He himself challenges us. He comforts us, leads us. He feeds our faith. We are experiencing God's presence in that way.

Secondly, we experience God's presence when we pray. Because what we are doing there is we are speaking to the one who loves us, who always desires to hear our prayers, who actually, he asks us to call him Abba Father, the one who is with us forever.

And finally, we experience God's presence when we repent. Because what is repentance? It is turning away from sin and to the person of God, to our heavenly Father, who forgives our sins, who calls us into relationship with him.

He calls us to have peace with him. And of course, this is something that we are called to do in Lent. Or maybe you didn't know that. But in Lent, there is this time of renewal, a time of renewing our reading and meditation of God's word, a time to renew our prayer life, a time of renewing our repentance, examining what it is in our life that we can turn away from and turn to the God who is present with us.

[11:57] These are three powerful ways of knowing the presence of God that makes us distinct and different for his sake. Well, I want you to look at verse 17 because an extraordinary thing happens.

God says yes to Moses' prayer. He says, this very thing that you have spoken, I will do. I will do it. And so what he does in that little verse is he restores God's people. They are all again included in the promise that God will be present with his people.

And the question has to be, why the sudden change? How can it be? How can Israel's sin that's still present stand in the presence of God?

Well, the other part of Moses' prayer, the prayer to know God, tells us how this is done. Moses asked in verse 18 to show him God's glory, in other words, the essential nature of God.

[13:00] And we discover in verse 19 that God's glory is his goodness. And notice in verse 19 that he says, God says, I'm going to make my goodness pass before you.

And he doesn't say about what Moses will see. He says, I will proclaim before you my name. In other words, God's glory is going to be something that is heard.

And what is heard is in chapter 34, verse 6. It tells us exactly what happens when Moses sees God's glory.

So look down there. God's glory is proclaimed here. He says, The Lord, the Lord, God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

You see, this is the essential nature of God that God chooses to give to Moses. Moses doesn't see all of God's glory. In fact, that would destroy him. That's why God has to protect him back in chapter 33 at the end.

[14:11] His hand has to cover Moses and he has to hide in the cleft of a rock because of the holiness of God. But God allows him to reveal what gives life.

It is the gospel, isn't it? It's the work of salvation that Jesus fulfills. This is a creed, those two verses that I just read that runs over and over through the Old Testament because it's the only way that God is present with his sinful people.

It's the way that Jesus, God out of his great love for his people, pursues them. And I want you to look at those verses again because there's five things about God here.

It says there that God is merciful. This is what God says about himself. In other words, he's saying that he is compassionate for those in need. He understands our weakness and he draws near to us. He provides the way to be present with us. Secondly, he is gracious. He desires to show us mercy. He gives us an extraordinary gift that we cannot ever deserve.

[15:16] God's grace. Thirdly, he is slow to anger. He acts against evil very deliberately. Thirdly, God is patient in dealing with sinners and his salvation is in mind.

Fourthly, God is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Well, this is a curious thing because I've heard that the God of the Old Testament is not the God of love.

Well, here it is. The essential nature of God is that he loves his people with a love that is loyal and never ends. It goes through sin. God never goes back on his promises.

He has a love for his people that cannot be measured. And finally, the essential nature of God, he says, is that he pardons sin.

And this is a glorious thing for us to hear. Literally, pardon means to lift or to carry in Hebrew. It is a beautiful picture of God lifting off of our shoulders and the shoulders of his people the burden and the guilt of sin.

[16 : 23] And it really speaks of restoration. It speaks of forgiveness. It speaks of being freed from the grip of sin. But notice that even as he pardons sin, God reveals how terrible and serious that sin is.

That's why he says, immediately after verse 7, he clears the guilty. By no means does he clear the guilty. He visits the iniquity of the father upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

God is telling us about the devastating consequence of sin. God doesn't tolerate it. In fact, it is the valuable and heavy grace of God that must meet sin and deal with it.

And in Jesus, we see how costly that grace is. And so these two verses don't allow us to treat sin or God's grace in a cavalier way.

It actually reveals them and makes them clear. And it's a strong call to Israel to repent and turn to the God of grace, to accept the gift of grace that would restore them, that would bring them into God's presence again.

[17 : 38] This is important for us to hear because our tendency, our sinful tendency, is that we would go light on our sin. And it's actually a tendency for us to go light on God's grace, on the glory, the heavy weight of glory, which is wonderful, and that meets sin and destroys its power.

That's why it's such a tragic thing for the church to attempt to bless what is called sin by God in His Word. God takes sin very seriously and that's why His grace is so deep and so strong.

God wants us to be present with Him, but sin leads us away from that presence. God desires continually that we would have the great and precious gift of His presence that is ours in Christ.

And that's why as we close this sermon, there is a lot for us to be thankful for about this passage.

Because what happens here is that God is renewing His covenant to dwell with His people by His grace and by Israel's repentance.

And what we're going to see as we close Exodus next week is we're going to see the construction of the tabernacle. We're going to see this picture of God's creation restored after being deeply and seemingly irrevocably marred by sin.

[19 : 06] It is restored by God's wonderful and great grace. Every time Israel would look at that tabernacle, they would say, it is only possible because God's grace has been poured out among us.

Now there are many things in this passage to take with us as we leave today, but I particularly hope that you leave this passage desiring the presence of God in your life because God desires your presence.

In this passage, God deeply desires to live with His people. He goes to these extraordinary lengths to restore His deeply sinful people and restore them by a deep, eternal grace.

In verse 14, it's almost shocking to hear these words in verse 14 because God reveals that you shall worship no other God. Why? Because the Lord whose name is Jealous is a jealous God.

And that's not a sinful jealousy. It's not a jealousy of suspicion and control. It is actually a deep and intimate love relationship that God has set up with us.

[20 : 18] And God, in that relationship, desires an exclusive relationship that is free of idols and free of lies. That's because we are created to be in God's presence, to enjoy life with God forever.

And so as you go into your world of work and busyness and leisure, this passage calls you to practice the presence of God, to experience God as you read his word, as you pray, and as you turn again to the one who gives us our joy and our peace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.