

Exodus 33:12-23 Seeking the Presence of God

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Well, it's a great, great privilege to be here with you today and looking at a remarkable passage. And I'd like today for us to have a look in more detail at the reading from Exodus, chapter 33. You know, as an Anglican minister, if you were to meet me for the first time at the rectory, in the parish of Warragul, in my study at the rectory - what you would see when you moved into that study is an enormous amount of books. You would think, wow, this person really studies the faith. I mean, there's an entire bookcase just with books of doctrine. There are rows of church history books. There's half a book case of translations of the original text of the Bible, and hundreds of other books.

So if you met me for the first time in my study at the rectory, you would gain an impression that I'm a thinker - that I like ideas; that I like to study. We Christians are known for what we think and what we believe. After all, what is a Christian, if not someone who believes in the Trinitarian God? Sovereign creator, father, saviour, Lord Jesus Christ, son of the father, and the Holy spirit. What is a Christian, if not someone that has a worldview that matches the Bible's understanding of the world of the world's problems and the solution to those problems? We are "believers". And shortly after this sermon, we're going to be reading through and saying an affirmation of faith. We are believers and we recite the Apostle's creed and the 10 commandments when we meet as a church. Even Hillsong church, a couple of years ago, responded to a request from an Anglican minister in Sydney who tweeted

"Oh, I wish Hillsong would write a song about the, about the apostles creed".

And so they did! "I believe in God, the father, I believe in God, the son, I believe in the Holy spirit".

And you know, I have books on my bookshelves with titles like "five essential truths to which all Christians must give assent" or, "12 gospel truths that we have to live by". I've got books that are written in the vein of "here we stand and we can do no other". And when I look at my life, I see a great focus on belief. We are known, we Christians, for our beliefs. Beliefs are indeed very important. Many Christians have died for the sake of defending what they hold to be the truth.

So I hope that beliefs are important to you. Beliefs were important to Moses. And as we read chapter 33 we remember that earlier, before chapter 33, God gave the 10 commandments to Moses. (Is that not what we think about when we think about Moses?)

In this text, though, there is another remarkable truth for us to grasp as well. Moses believes, but his beliefs are not enough! They're not enough to sustain him. And so he comes to God and he asks for something more. Believing is important. But I think we learn from this passage that it's only half the formula for being God's children, beliefs are the foundation on which a greater life with God can be built. There is something more; without which Moses cannot imagine succeeding in any sense of the word. He cannot imagine succeeding in the tasks that God has given him in his leadership of God's people. He cannot imagine God's people being successful as they enter the land of canaan and they become God's nation there.

He cannot imagine living a godly life without this something; this essential other thing. In addition to all that he knows to be true. In addition to his beliefs, this essential other thing is the very presence and companionship of God himself. And so we see Moses saying to the Lord, we read in verse 12 of chapter 33. "You've been telling me to lead the people, but you haven't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You've said, I know you by name and, and you have found favour with me. If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways. So I might know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember this nation is your people", and the Lord replies, "my presence will go with you and I will give you rest".

My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. The Lord promises.

The Lord actually wants this. He wants to be with his people. He wants to be present with his people. He said “I will be your God and you will be my people and I will give you rest”. So I'd like to reflect on what it means to live in God's presence; to not just be a ‘believer’, but someone who dwells in God's presence. What does ‘the presence’ of God mean? Literally the Hebrew word for presence is ‘face’ and we come across it for the first time in Genesis when Adam and Eve sin, and they hide from the Lord's presence. Literally they hide from the Lord's face. And we read here, God's promised that his presence will be with Moses and the people. In Psalm 16 we read “you fill me with joy in your presence. There are pleasures at your right hand”. So to be with God, to be in God's presence is a matter of great joy.

But *being in God's presence* is a bit of religious jargon for us. It's a term that we throw around and it becomes a bit esoteric and it loses its meaning. If we look at the OXFORD dictionary and how the dictionary defines presence, the dictionary does talk about physical presence, but it also reminds us of a few phrases that we use about presence: such as “to make one man's presence felt”, which means to have a strong influence on a situation or “to have presence of mind”, which means the ability to remain calm and to make good decisions, often quick decisions in a difficult situation. So; *calmness, influence, presence, with*.

I was reflecting on a couple of scenarios to explain God's presence with the us. If God is present with me, is that like, when I walk into a room, I've got a VIP right next to me and all the doors are going to open because I'm in the presence of this very powerful, very powerful person. In my experience that is not what the presence of God with me means. Or is it (lots of us would wish for this perhaps) like going into an exam (and life is the exam) but being allowed to take the smartest person in the world, along with you as your helper to help you in the exam. So you get everything right. In my experience, that is not what having the presence of God in our life means. It's not like every door's going to open and everything's going to go very smoothly. Here is what some others have said God's presence is like for them: “it is like when a loving husband and a loving wife are at home together and all is at peace”, or “it is like being in the company of your very best friend”. Many of us are separated from our friends, by the Corona virus restrictions and not being able to go far from our homes and we have come to really value our friendships even more than before.

What a great thing it is to be in the presence of our best friend. That is more, I think, what it's like to be in God's presence. As we look at Exodus chapter 33, and what Moses says about wanting God's presence, we learn a few other things

Firstly, that God's presence is a measure of God's favour. In order to reassure Moses that indeed he had found favour with God, God says to him, *my presence will go with you. You have found favour with me. I will go with you and we'll be with you*. So God's presence is a measure of God's favour. It's God saying, ‘I'm pleased with you’. ‘I'm pleased with my people’. ‘You are acceptable to me’. ‘I know you’. ‘I accept you’. ‘I like you’. ‘I approve of you’. To find favour is to win praise from someone, to have their support.

And this is what God says. Moses says to him, if your presence doesn't go with us, don't send us up from here. He doesn't want to go anywhere without the very presence of God. He says in verse 16, how will anyone know that you're pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us. So to have God present with us is to know that God is pleased with us.

Secondly, he goes on to say that God's presence is the only thing that is going to distinguish them. And he says in verse 16, again, “what else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth, except that you are with us?” So, God's presence is what gives his people, their distinctiveness. Distinctiveness is not due to their practices per se, its not just that they worship in a temple, it's not their practises, but the fact that God is with them.

God is with them in a continuing way, present with them.

And thirdly, God's presence is the secret formula for entering into true rest. That's why God says "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest". "I will go with you into the land where I'm leading you, this land of milk and honey, where you will find rest: rest from their toil, rest from their struggle, rest from the dangers that they're emerging out of, and into a life of peace. And sadly, we know that for God's people under the old covenant, they only ever experienced that rest in a partial way, a fragmented way, but not completely. They do end up becoming estranged from God. Again.

Now when we look at the new Testament, God's presence is very much focused on the incarnation - that God became flesh and walked among us, dwelt with us, tabernacled with us in Jesus Christ and achieved for us the victory over sin.

That thing that separates us from God, the Bible says, Jesus bridged for us; he reconciled us to God. And *reconciliation* is a relationship term. Jesus made it possible for us to enjoy God's friendship, to be called God's children, to have God's companionship. Exodus 33 goes on to describe Moses' request for God to show himself to Moses. He says to Yahweh, "show me your glory". And we know from that reading that God does show himself to Moses, but he can't reveal himself fully. He can't reveal himself fully because Moses would die from seeing the glory of God. And yet we read in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians, chapter four, we read glory is displayed in the face of Jesus Christ. Or we might say the presence of Jesus Christ.

We are even further ahead in time, and Christ no longer walks this earth, but he didn't leave us alone. He promised us that he would leave us with peace and that he would be present with us through the presence of the Holy spirit.

And there's a marvellous passage in John chapter 14, where Jesus says, "all this I've spoken while still with you. But the advocate, the Holy spirit, whom the father will send in my name will teach you all things and remind you of everything I've said to you. Peace I leave you. Peace I give you. He speaks earlier saying " anyone who loves me, will obey my teaching and my father will love them. And we will come to them and we will make our home with them". What a promise that continues to be there for us of God's companionship! God's very presence in our life! And so I put it to you that for Christians today, belief is not enough. Belief is not enough.

The ideal Christian life is not merely going from *unbelief* to *belief*, it's going from captivity to freedom. Going from isolation, (a term we're very familiar with at the moment), to the companionship of God himself. For Christians today God's presence continues to be a measure of his favour, the secret formula for us enter entering rest, and God's presence continues to make us distinctive. And the less we have of God's presence in our lives, then the less distinctive we are, the less restful we are, the less we are able to do God's work.

So I want to conclude by asking you - Is God present with you in your life? Do you know God's favour? His approval, his acceptance, his support? Does God guide you to rest? Is God's so present that people discern that that distinguishes you? Do people know there's something different about you?

They say in a sermon that you should never talk about yourself unless it's in a self-deprecating way, or it was a very long time ago. So I'm going to tell a personal story from a very long time ago. Many years ago, probably about three years after I became a Christian, I was at Bible college. And I was just "full" of the Lord. And in a term break, I went on a flight overseas. And for any Aussie that travels overseas, it means sitting in a plane for a very long time. And I was sitting next to this fellow who struck up a conversation with me. And so I talked with him. I didn't actually tell him that I was a Christian. We just talked probably for about 40 minutes until it got to the point where I did actually say, because it came up in the conversation, that I was a Christian.

And he said to me, "I knew! I knew there was something different about you!" This was a remarkable thing for someone to say – effectively that the presence of God with a person, though not a visible presence, is nevertheless perceptible.

This week, a Facebook friend of mine wrote a tribute to another Christian friend and mentor, an older Christian friend who had been a mentor to him since he was a young adult in university days. And this is what he wrote about his friend that had just passed away. He says, reflecting on when he met him as a young adult, he says, "I had never met anyone like him. He was a great leader. He had a genuine and exuberant faith and a care for others. And to be introduced to him was to have a life experience". What a remarkable thing to say. And he recalled that he was once on a leadership camp with this fellow and many others. And they were all sleeping in a dormitory. And he woke up just before dawn. And he looked across the room and he could see this man sitting in bed praying. And he thought to himself, "this guy is the real deal. He actually has a relationship with God. I didn't" said my Facebook friend. And he wanted a relationship with God- wanted God's presence in the same way he could detect God's presence with this other fellow, and so he pursued it. And this man was a mentor all his life. It is life changing to know someone whose life enjoys the presence of God in a way that though not visible is perceptible, distinguishable.

I also want to ask whether our churches continue to enjoy that kind of presence of God or whether we have become merely doctrinally correct, creed reciting, knowledgeable about the faith, with many books, rather than having what this man describes as the real deal.

Moses' relationship with God leaves us with an immense challenge. This text from Exodus chapter 33 shows Moses' desperate request to be in God's presence. That must be our desperate request too. If we've learned nothing else during the coronavirus shut down, it is that the church is not our buildings. It's not our Sunday meetings alone. It's us. *We* are the church, each one of us. So it comes back to us personally- we are the ones that need to walk in God's presence, spend time with God, know God that well, and be known by him.

So what can we do? The Bible reassures us that God is never far from us and encourages us to reach out to him. Have you ever known someone who just got engaged, and they're so full of love that they don't even have to tell you? You can just tell. But any couple who have been married for several decades can tell you that that glow kind of fades and it actually takes effort to keep that romance in the relationship. Date nights, time together, shared pursuits.

For Christians, I think the effort for us in maintaining that closeness to God is around our prayer life, because prayer is entering into the very presence of God we read, and we want to be in his company. We want to be not satisfied to be apart from him, but to long for his return. And if God's presence with us is the *secret sauce* for our lives, then in my experience, *prayer* is the kitchen table where that secret sauce is made, because in prayer we draw near, we search both our own hearts and we search for the heart of God in prayer as well. In prayer, we are revived in our relationship with Jesus and Jesus' love and tenderness and kindness come to us afresh. And we abide in him. We enjoy father, son and spirit.

Prayer is such a simple thing. And yet it is so easily crowded out of our lives, overlooked or minimised. So let me end by leading us in prayer, let's spend some time at that kitchen table for a moment. Let's pray.

*Heavenly father, we will not settle for mere belief. We want your presence be with us. We desperately need your presence. How can we restore our churches? How can our churches recover after the year that we've had without your presence? How can we share the gospel without your presence? How can we be your people without your presence? And so we ask for it and our hearts are turned towards you, Lord Jesus, the one who declared God's favour to us.*

*Jesus, you brought us back to God and you reconciled us through the cross and you sent your spirit to be with us. Be with us. Holy spirit, fill our lives, fill our days, our weeks and our years with the companionship of yourself and our Lord and saviour. And father, walk with us in these troubled times and in our troubled lives. Stay with us and change us that we might know your favour and that otherAs through us, will be able to glimpse the glory of your salvation. We pray in the name of our saviour. Jesus. Amen.*