

Sermon File # 681

Scripture Text and Reading (selected portions of text): Exodus 33

Sermon Title: *God's People and His Presence*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 16 October 2011

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

All Rights Reserved.

God's People and His Presence

Introduction:

Let's open our Bibles to our text, as we continue our journey through God's Book of Deliverance, now in Chapter 33 of Exodus. Last Sunday we noted what happens when people sin, the tragic story of the golden calf, when many of the Israelites fell under judgment for their apostasy, disobeying the 2nd Commandment and worshiping an idol. We noted how Moses engaged God in prayer for the rebellious Israelites, intercession that averted the full wrath of God, who was willing to spare the repentant.

Now in Chapter 33 we find a broken people and their leader, who are dismayed to hear that the Lord is unwilling to continue with them in their journey toward the Promised Land of Canaan. The Lord says that in their stubborn condition it would be perilous for them to be accompanied by the holy God, in the presence of his special Angel; and so he would send a surrogate, ordinary angel to guide them on their journey; but he himself would not go with them. I want us to note the response of the

people of God and their realization of their absolute dependence on his presence. Follow as I read **Exodus 33**.

There's just no substitute for real presence, especially with someone you love and who loves you.

We don't know what we'd do without the wonderful technology of Skype, by which we can speak with and view our children and grandchildren face to face at least once a week. We also, as another alternative, email with them and receive their photos and videos they post on YouTube, and use our "Call America" phone service, when we need to just talk.

But there's no substitute for being with those we love! Our kids are making plans for us to all get together with them during the holidays; and even though we try to visit with them as much as possible, we sometimes feel guilty for not visiting them more often. It's natural to want to be with those we love as much as possible—to enjoy their presence, by voice, sight and even touch. And I might add, there's no substitute for holding your grandchild in your lap!

Talk with young and even older adults who are struggling with security and self-esteem issues and many will express their resentment or sorrow over the fact that their parents, or one of their parents, simply were not there for them during their critically formative years. Ambitious and often wealthy parents who substituted giving elaborate and expensive toys and other gifts to their children are nevertheless resented because they were unwilling to give the time to be with their children. The same is true with children from broken or simply dysfunctional homes, with an absent father or negligent parent.

We are made for personal relationships and depend on certain key connections to become healthy people. God created us for a relationship with himself, and no one can be healthy or complete spiritually apart from knowing God in a personal way. God called the people of Israel into a personal relationship with himself, to know him and to experience the fellowship and communion of his presence. The reason God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1f; 15:1ff) was to form a people who would be distinctly his and where he would make his unique dwelling place.

Exodus 32 and 33 are the climax of the Book of Exodus because they feature the purpose of the entire deliverance experience—that God might save a people for himself, where his glorious presence can dwell. The sin of the golden calf placed God's purpose in jeopardy, and so God had to deal seriously with the sin of apostasy. Those who were graciously spared God's judgment through Moses' intercession were now in a frame of mind to realize their need and to deeply desire the presence of the Lord God with them. The removal of their jewelry and fine clothing (perhaps part of the plunder they took from Egypt, (12:35f) was expressive of their repentance (Oswalt, *NLTSB*, 181). They realized that there's no substitute for his presence. And we too need to come to that crucial realization. The presence

of God called them and brought them out of Egypt, across the sea and to Mt Sinai, where God gave them his covenant law and they made their covenant promises to him. But now, in the wake of their sinful failure, God's presence was at risk. Note from our text that...

God's people depend on his presence

When the Lord God said that he would not go with them on the rest of their journey to the Promised Land the Israelites were distressed (2f). "This is not merely a setback; it means the end of the road" (Enns, 578). The Lord God himself was the Angel who had revealed himself to Moses, and who had accompanied, protected and provided for the Israelites, and the thought of having to depend on an ordinary angel was frightening, knowing what they were up against (Wiersbe, 197). They depended on the Lord God...

For deliverance

As we noted last Sunday, Moses had offered himself as a mediator, willing to die in order to the Lord God to forgive the people's sins. But God refused his offer, knowing that no human, even a good and godly man like Moses, can provide atonement, the forgiveness of sins. God alone delivers his people from the wages of sin—its consequence of death.

God's mercy alone spared the people, and we who are in the New Covenant know that God's forgiveness was made possible by Christ's death upon the cross and his victorious resurrection. We, like the Israelites, depend on God's deliverance from the power of the Enemy and also from the downward, destructive pull of our old sinful nature.

Apart from the presence of God we are hopelessly lost and condemned. Even for mortal life, we depend on the presence of God and his general goodness. Jesus refers to this general grace and goodness when he says how the Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous (Matthew 5:45).

Although we know there is immeasurable suffering and gross injustice in this fallen world, we also should recognize that the presence of God mitigates suffering and holds many disasters and untold tragedies in check. Everyone, regardless of unbelief or immoral conduct, knows something of this general grace and longsuffering of a God who doesn't want anyone to perish, but desires everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Hell is the only place where God is not to some degree present, which is why it's a place of absolute hopelessness and unmitigated suffering and darkness. Those who finally reject God's deliverance through Christ and spurn his general and his special,

saving grace will have irrevocably chosen hell as the only option to his presence. Hell truly is the end of the road.

Like the Israelites we too depend on God's presence for our guidance. He alone is omniscient and, as their psalmist would later put to poetry and music, the Lord is our faithful and good Shepherd (Psalm 23:1; 28:9; 78:71). Because the Lord God is omnipotent, omniscient, faithful and loving, we can trust him to guide us in the way we should go.

The Israelites had seen God miraculously and faithfully provide water and manna and deliverance from their enemies, and the prospects of moving forward without him were daunting, to say the least. Not only Moses, but the rest of the Israelites seemed to understand their desperate need for God's presence to deliver them. They knew it would have been better to remain in the desert with his presence than to go into the Promised Land of milk and honey without him (Motyer, 308).

What a blessed relief it must have been when the Lord God assured Moses that he would in fact go with them (14). The Lord promised that he would give them his rest, which is more literally translated "roost" (Oswalt, *NLTSB*, 182). His presence would give them a place to roost, like a bird and her chicks, under his wings of protection and provision. Wherever we may find ourselves, because God is with us he enables us to "roost," "to settle down for rest" (*Webster's*). His presence can give us a sense of peace and settled-ness even in the most unsettling of circumstances.

God's people depend on his presence also...

For distinction

Moses appealed to the Lord that his presence was assurance of his pleasure and approval (16a) and also that his presence was the distinctive feature of God's people (16b). A personal relationship with God is the distinctive mark of his people, "the great divide that runs down the center of the human race" (Ryken, 1031).

This appeal for the Lord's presence to distinguish his people is all important. Lesser people would have been happy to have the Lord's presence simply to help them reach their goal of the Promised Land, but otherwise leave them alone to live the way they desired. A lot of so-called Christians want to go to heaven when they die and are more than happy for God to help them make a good living, keep their kids out of trouble, and help them survive accidents and illnesses. But beyond his general grace and goodness and benefits, they would prefer that God not interfere with their lives (Ryken, 1020).

This was true of the Old Covenant and even more so in the New Covenant because God has given himself completely to those who have faith in Christ. By faith in Jesus Christ we are born from above (John 3:3) and receive a new nature through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17), who is Christ in us (Colossians 1:17). We have a new nature as children of God (1 John 3:1) and now are to bear a

close resemblance in our character to Christ himself (1 Peter 1:16, quoting Leviticus 44f), who produces his character in us, what we know of as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f). Peter and John, and no doubt others as well, gave the distinct impression that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). His character had “rubbed off” on them.

Just as for the Israelites, the presence of God isn’t always comfortable. As Charles Spurgeon said, “God never permits his people to sin successfully” (quoted by Wiersbe, 198). If we truly belong to God, he will make his errant children miserable in their sin until we come back to him in repentance for restoration to his will. This is the chastisement that the Israelites experienced and the discipline they would continue to receive along the way to the Promised Land.

As Paul Scherer says, “no place on earth can be called ‘safe in the arms of Jesus,’” and “None of my Sunday school teachers ever told me how dangerous a place that was!” (Scherer, 179ff).

The presence of God is dangerous to sinful complacency and willful disobedience. The Israelites had already discovered that, and we too may well find out that the Lord disciplines those he loves and always for our good, that we might share in his holiness. No truer words were ever spoken than those from this passage in Hebrews: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” We need to bear in mind, however, the end result: “Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:6-11).

God is committed to making us his holy people, who show forth his glory and the beauty of his holiness now and will glorify him forever (Philippians 2:14ff). He will allow experiences, including difficulties and suffering, to draw us closer to his love, deeper into his joy, and to produce more of his character in us (Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4). We are called to follow Christ in a cruciform life (Matthew 16:24ff) that identifies us as people who belong to the Crucified. Beware if you “sin successfully,” that is, if you can sin and not suffer a sense of alienation from God and some form of his discipline. Your spiritual complacency may be indicative that you’re not really one of God’s children. He disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6).

God’s people depend on his presence and...

God’s people desire his presence

Moses led the way for those who desired the presence of the Lord and not just what God could do for them. The people stood in awe as Moses would enter the tent of meeting (the tabernacle had not yet been constructed), and watch the shekinah cloud of God’s glorious presence come down and stay at the entrance to the tent while Moses would have an audience with the Lord God (7-9). These conversations

were not theophanies, i.e. special manifestations of God, but were occasions of “face to face intimacy” with God (Durham, 443).

Moses enjoyed the presence of God in prayer and intercession, but he also desired an even greater intimacy with God. After the Lord God had assured him of answered prayer, of his close relationship with him, and his pleasure in him, Moses wasn't through. He desired God's fullness of presence...

For the sight of his glory

Moses asked the Lord God to show him his glory (Hebrew *kabod*, 18), meaning his majesty, brilliance, wealth, weight and significance. He wanted to see all that God is, which was not possible. Had all of God's unveiled glory been revealed, Moses would have been destroyed by the brilliance and holy fire and light. God granted only what Moses could stand, allowing him to see his back but not his face, which was a synonym for glory. “To behold God face to face is to know him absolutely, to exhaust the depth of his being, to remove the last vestige of mystery from the being of God. To attempt to embrace the full nature of God is to forget that there is a hiddenness about the nature of God which we ignore at our own peril.” A person “never sees God face to face, never apprehends God fully....God is always the God of the beyond” (Honeycutt, 441).

Moses' request to see God's glory came about 1250 to 1450 years too soon (Kelley). John writes in the Prologue of his Gospel that the Word, Christ, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The amazing truth is, that because Christ came to be “God with us” (Matthew 1:23) we are able to see more than Moses saw. In fact, “the Christian child, who looks upon the ‘glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,’ has a vision which outshines the flashing radiance that shone round Moses” (Maclaren, 194f). And, “In a sense, Moses' prayer was finally answered on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30-32), where he shared a vision—however brief—of the Lord's glory with Elijah and three of Jesus' disciples” (Youngblood and Kaiser, 136).

All of us who are the children of God have seen “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Moses' face shone after he had been in the tent of meeting with God, but Paul says that each one of God's people in the New Covenant “reflect the Lord's glory” and are being transformed into the likeness of Christ “with ever-increasing glory” by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). By faith we are more blessed than those who saw Jesus in his physical presence, Jesus says (John 20:29), when we see him by faith.

We see the glory of God as we see Jesus on the cross and risen from the grave and trust and follow him as our risen Lord and Savior. As Peter says, even though we haven't seen Jesus with our physical eyes, we love him, and “even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious

joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8f).

We cannot see the full physical radiance of his unveiled glory while we remain in our sinful bodies. That must await our glorification (1 John 3:2). The Lord told Moses he would be allowed to see his goodness and hear his name, which revealed his character (19). But we can see the perfect character of Jesus as the divine Son of God, who said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When we see the person and character of Christ in Jesus, revealed to us in Scripture and imparted to our understanding by the Holy Spirit, we see the glory of God unto salvation.

We who have seen the glory of his presence by saving faith, like Moses, are not content with that initial sight of his glory. Like Moses, Job (19:26) and David (Psalm 17:15), we should yearn to see as much of God’s glory as he will allow us in this earthly body. The Lord told Moses he would be hidden by his hand in the cleft of a rock when God’s glory passed by, then Moses could see the glory from behind but would not be allowed to see God’s face, the fullness of his glory (21ff). What we are allowed to see also at times is the glory from behind, as God lets us see what his glory has done.

Of course, the greatest disclosure of past glory is that of the cross and the empty tomb, what God has done for our deliverance. We can also see his glory through the 2,000 years of church history and what he has done for us in recent years. Sometimes in personal worship but also in our corporate worship, only after it’s all said and done do I see traces of God’s glory, the work he’s done. There are times I have left a hospital room after a time of glorious prayer with a dying saint, and have thought to myself the words of Jacob at Bethel:

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven’” (Genesis 28:16f).

The Day will come when we will gaze upon the fullness of God’s unveiled glory. We’ll be able to stand it then because we will also be glorified, with the removal of the last vestiges of sin (1 John 3:2). And in the meantime, while on our earthly pilgrimage of faith, God’s people desire his presence...

For the satisfaction of his fullness

Like Moses, our desire should be, not for his material blessings, but for God himself and the pleasure we are to find in him. Six times in five verses of our text we find the verb “to know,” and it’s a word of personal knowledge and experience (Cole, 225). The Apostle Paul also had this deep desire to know God in a deeper way, and he realized that the pathway to the deepest, most intimate knowledge of Christ was not just to experience the power of his resurrection but also “the fellowship of sharing in

his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). There can be no true intimacy with Christ apart from the way of the cross of self-denial and suffering.

We are to desire God’s presence so much that we’re willing to pay whatever price is necessary. That’s not an easy thing for me to say. Yet it’s the only way to find true satisfaction. God desires us to find our satisfaction, not in our circumstances but in our fellowship with him. Alexander Maclaren said that we are to be satisfied but not satiated, i.e. gluttoned or gorged to excess. “Enjoyment increases capacity, and increase of capacity is increase of desire” (192). As we grow in Christ and his presence fills us with more of his joy in the awareness and delight of his presence, we don’t become content—rather, we want more of him because our appetite and capacity for his presence grows.

Moses’ desire for the Lord and the Lord’s delight in him was a true love relationship and so our desire for Christ is to be as insatiable as that of a lover for his or her beloved (Oswalt, *CBC*, 531). If we can come to this place in our experience of faith, we will learn to welcome whatever “unexpected pathway to joy” God has for us, even if it’s by way of “shattered dreams” (Crabb, 1ff).

Our desire is for God himself, that we find our joy in him. I’ve thought a lot lately about that verse that says “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). It seems this promise is of the Lord himself being given to us. If I may paraphrase: “Make the Lord the desire of your heart and he will give you the desire of your heart—himself,” in the fullness of his joy and sweet but sometimes disturbingly dangerous fellowship. But he alone truly satisfies our hearts. I think I am learning, as the Lord weans me away from other desires, that I am to find my joy and delight in him and not even in noble but lesser things, such as the continuation of active pastoral ministry.

Conclusion:

God’s people depend on and desire his presence. Have you discovered the joy as well as the dangerous challenge of the presence of the Lord? You can’t Skype him or even direct dial him long distance on your phone or send him an email. These are unworthy and inadequate media by which to connect with the living God, who is closer than we realize (Romans 10: 6ff). He’s available only in person, in his awesome, sin-consuming presence that makes an immediate and everlasting change in your life.

Jesus invites you into his presence, into a relationship of sharing his very bearable yoke. The reason his yoke is easy and his burden is light is that he walks with you as your yokefellow (Matthew 11:28-30). When we’re yoked with Christ we have to go the direction he takes us.

His presence in your life means he enters as your Lord and Savior, and leads your life in the way of the cross, which is discipleship, learning about him and learning from him.

His presence means he guides you and delivers you through life's dangers and provides all your needs, but not all your wants. But you can be confident that his way is best. The lesson we learn from our text is, "We should not set even one foot in a new direction unless we are certain that God will go with us" (Ryken, 1031). It's better to stay in the desert with God than launch out to a place, or into an experience, a relationship or anything that looks promising, without God. Moses wouldn't go without God and neither should we.

Today we can renew our commitment to seek, wait upon and depend on God's presence in our lives. But more than just depend on him, we should, like Moses, take another step and learn to desire God, to find fullness of joy and true and lasting pleasure in his presence (Psalm 16:11). Every child of God, saved by his grace, has been given the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). We don't need more of him; rather, we need to give him more of us, surrendering the Lordship of Christ and living with a new awareness of Christ's presence and praying for him to produce his character in us. As the psalmist admonishes the worshiping people, "Look to (seek) the Lord and his strength; seek his face (presence) always" (Psalm 105:4).

In Revelation, the risen Christ gave a word of warning to five of the seven churches of Asia Minor, that unless they repented of their loss of love, idolatry, immorality, moral compromise, hypocrisy and unfulfilled commitment, he would take his presence from them ("removed lampstand"). A church can function as an institution long after Christ's presence departs, but it will be joyless, powerless, divided and deficient in love. May Christ never depart from this sweet, vibrant fellowship, joyful worship and ministry here at IBC! Rather, may we seek his presence of joy, unity, fullness and power as never before!

Here at IBC Brussels we have new furnaces, a new, efficient power supply in our building as of this past weekend (the object of our latest fundraising effort, I might add!). CH Spurgeon had a team of deacons praying every Sunday for the worship service in a room beneath the great sanctuary of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, a room the great preacher called "the heating room." May we realize we have the presence of Christ in us and in our congregation! May we together seek his fullness of power and joy to warm our hearts and empower our lives as his missional people in this world that is dying for lack of his saving presence and power!

Let's settle for nothing less than the personal presence of the living God.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why was the presence of the Lord God so critical for the Israelites?
2. What made his presence dangerous to them (verse 3)?
3. Why is someone's personal presence so important to a relationship?
4. What is the promise of God regarding his presence to those who follow Christ?
5. In what way(s) can God's presence be disturbing to someone living outside of his will? How could his presence possibly be dangerous?
6. To what extent should we desire to see God's glory, i.e. the manifestation of his glorious presence?
7. Read Psalm 37:4 and Philippians 3:10. Think about how much you are delighting in God. What is the desire of your heart and what desire do you think he wants to give you? Think about Paul's desire to know Christ in a deeper way, and what that desire might have cost him, and whether or not you are ready to have this same desire.

Sources cited in this manuscript:

R Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*

Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God's Unexpected Pathway to Joy*

John I Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 3: Exodus*

Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*

Roy L Honeycutt, *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Volume 1, Revised (General Articles, Genesis-Exodus)*

Page H Kelley, sermon preached at First Baptist Church of Fairborn, Ohio, on 7 May 1978.

Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers*

J A Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (*The Bible Speaks Today* Series, Old Testament Series Editor, J A Motyer)

John N Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Genesis and Exodus, General Editor, Philip W Comfort

_____, *NLT Study Bible, New Living Translation*, Second Edition, notes on Exodus

Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (*Preaching the Word* Series, General Editor, R Kent Hughes)

Paul Scherer, *The Word God Sent*

Ronald Youngblood and Walter C Kaiser, Jr., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*, General Editor, Kenneth Barker, notes on Exodus

Warren W Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus*

All Rights Reserved.