

God's Gracious Presence and Closeness (Exodus 33:1-17)

What would you do without God's presence? What would or could you do if God's not in it?

- What about moving from CA to your dream land but without God's presence and people?
- What about a dream job offer but it means you'd be away from God's family fellowship?
- What if God promised you a dream house and land flowing with blessing but no church?
- What if God promised us an angel's protection, but not His gracious presence among us?
- How would it feel if He said 'go without me, I can't dwell among sinners in their midst?'

Ex 33 raises those kinds of questions, for this life and the next. Turn to Ex 33

John Piper: 'The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?'--God is the Gospel, 15

Or would you mourn the absence of Christ eternally, or temporarily in this world?

Heb 11 said Moses counted Christ and His reproach greater riches than all the treasure of Egypt

- He gladly gave up wealth and fleeting pleasures, looking to the reward Canaan pointed to
- In Ex 23, Israel's promised land is flowing with milk and honey, and no sickness if they obey
- God promised peace and pleasure and protection from disaster, like a foretaste of heaven
 - They would be blessed and enjoy rest, but Ex 33 announces God isn't going with them
 - Will they be satisfied with heaven-like land if the Lord is not there for them, just Moses?
 - Israel gets promises, protection and provision but in their sin, God will keep His distance

Context: God's presence is staying at Sinai and sending off sinful Israel

Ex 33:1 *The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.'² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but **I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.**"⁴ When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. [Israel hears this word as national disaster]*

- Good news: Israel's travel is still booked and guaranteed. Bad news: God's not traveling
- He's cancelling His reservation but tells them to go up to their destination without Him
- Heaven will provide a travel guide who drives out enemies, but God won't be joining up

Maybe it's a bit like that fictional traveling party preparing to enter the forest of Mirkwood.

- Their guardian and guide defeated a dragon, and brought them to and from a mountain
- But they hear a disastrous word: Gandalf the Grey won't be traveling with them and they mourned, 'groaned and looked most distressed, and Bilbo wept. They had begun to think Gandalf was going to come all the way and would always be there to help them out of difficulties... They begged him not to leave them... but he would not change his mind.'¹
- In Exodus, Yahweh defeats Pharaoh, then guards and guides Israel to and from Mt. Sinai
- Israel mourns His announced absence, but if their mediator begs God stay, is there hope?

v. 14: God tells Moses "**My presence will go with you [singular], and I will give you rest.**"¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with [Moses to God] do not bring **us** up from here.¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, **I and your people?** Is it not in **your going with us**, so that **we** are distinct, **I and your people**, from every other people on the face of the earth?"¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Title: God's gracious presence and closeness. 1st point: Only the repentant can enjoy it (v. 1-6)

- His general presence is everywhere but it takes repentance to enjoy His gracious presence
 - His special fellowship isn't for those who won't turn from sin, like Israel at start of ch 33
 - In v. 3-4 Israel hears they're a stiff-necked people God can't be near, and Israel mourns
 - v. 4 is a turning point in this book: Israel mourns sin, grieving the loss of God's closeness
 - o If you like your sin, you'd like a holy God to stay far away, but Israel is changing
 - o Before for milk and honey they'd go 'with or without You, God'—this is a change
 - o To the unredeemed, v. 3 appeals: a land of rich resources but no Redeemer nearby
 - o Prosperity without a personal relationship to a Lord you have to bow your neck to
 - o Note v. 2 promises an angel to drive out bad guys, that's a good deal for the carnal
 - o But the redeemed spiritual mind isn't satisfied with an angel, it wants God Himself
 - o Not just obstacles removed or blessings, repenting people know they need the Lord
 - In ch 32 a disaster of death almost came on all, now they see life without God as disaster
 - In ch 32 at the golden calf they didn't want the Lord on His terms, but they're changing
 - In ch 20 they wanted to stay far off from God and only Moses go near God, but not now
 - By God's grace they want God among them in their midst, near in His gracious presence
 - The unrepentant can't be in His presence for a moment, but with repentance there's hope
- In v. 5 God had said *"Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'"* ⁶ *Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.*
- God doesn't change His mind like man does, but has their stiff-necked thinking changed?
 - God knows all things including how He'll respond if Israel repents in this test of trust
 - That jewelry from Egypt they'd made idols from and likely included amulets, paganism
 - Will they keep wearing around their necks what led them to sin, or will they put it off?

Will you take off what takes you into sin, from this day onward?

2x it says God doesn't draw near to 'stiff-necked people' (v. 3, v. 5). What is a stiff-necked person?

- It's the opposite of a person whose head is bowed to the Master he yields its obedience to
- Stiff necks go along with a nose up or head held high, thinking you're better than others²
- Maybe you literally stiffen when challenged and refuse to be humbled by God's Word
 - o Maybe it's other areas of life where you're stubborn (you call it 'strong willed':)
- Maybe you act or speak respectful but expect others to respect your stubborn self-will
- How often do you think you're right and all others are wrong? You might be a stiffneck if

I didn't write this but can you check any of these boxes? You might be stiff-necked if you 'refuse to listen to good spiritual counsel.'³ [Or] say, "I'm sorry; that's just the way I am," and...expect everyone else to deal with it. [Or if you] ask for advice, but...don't follow it...go ahead and do what [you] were planning to do anyway. [Stiff-necked people] are unwilling to be corrected.⁴ "Yes," they say, "but my situation is different," and then they offer some kind of excuse.⁵ When they go through suffering, they complain about it, but they never seem to learn anything from it. They never change. They never grow. And the saddest thing of all is that they don't even know it. Since they never bow in true submission to God, they don't realize how stiff-necked they are. So don't be stiff-necked! Assume that you might be wrong; and when you are wrong, admit it. If you ask for counsel from someone in spiritual authority, try to follow it. Listen when people correct you, especially if what they're saying makes you angry.

This is almost always a sign that there's some truth to what they're saying.⁶ You might be one if not...

2 Chronicles 30:8 *Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD...*

Proverbs 29:1 *He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.*

James 4: 'God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves... Humble yourselves before the Lord...mourn...Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you...' (v. 7-10)

The unrepentant won't enjoy the nearness of His presence but there's grace if we humbly bow

- Israel's head is down as they mourn stiff-necked sin, and tore temptations off their neck

We may not need to take off ornaments, but we need to put off arrogance and put on humility

- I think this is true repentance at the end of v. 5, from this day forward no more ornaments
- Heb 12:1 NLT: *let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us*
- Col 3:8 NET: **put off** all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth.

Eph 4:22 says we're 'to **take off your former way of life, the old self...to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness...**' (CSB, ISV 'strip off your old man')

If you need help doing that, seek and submit to godly help

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp

Point #2: God offers mercy through a mediator (v. 7-11). It's all who sought the Lord in v. 7.

- We all need a mediator, that means someone to go between, intercede, plead your case

Mercy means not getting what's deserved (judgment), God mercifully will still be around Israel

- God won't go with Israel among them, but they could go to God through their mediator
- Sinners can't have God in their midst, but outside it, God gave a merciful meeting place
 - o God was near enough that sinners could still come and meet with Him via Moses
 - o His gracious presence and closeness is still available to the repentant who seek it

Isa 55:6: *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way...*

- Turn from sinful thoughts, return to Him, He'll have compassion and abundantly pardon
- This tent isn't the later tabernacle tent in the middle of the camp (it hadn't been built yet)
- This is a smaller temporary tent for meeting God outside the camp, 'far off from the camp'
- 3x in 1 verse it emphasizes it's outside, not among them, but they could seek God there
- And don't miss the mercy, they could go to the meeting place and seek God's favor there
 - o But God's people need to look to the mediator and their standing in relation to him

⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and **watch Moses** until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent...

- At their doors God's presence in a pillar of cloud was visible and visitable to His people
 - o This pillar was high enough all Israel could see it as God leads His people by it
 - o But in v. 9 it now descends, God condescends His gracious presence to meet them
- What a mercy that God's manifest glory in heaven had come down and they could come!
- Israelites in reverence would stand amazed in that presence standing at the meeting place
- And v. 10 said they would rise up and worship this merciful God who allowed a mediator

¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

- Joshua was the only Israelite on the mount with Moses not with Israel when they rebelled
- He's Moses' personal assistant, a protégé, an OT prototype of a deacon serving a church
- This is God's house before the tabernacle where it says God spoke to Moses 'face to face'
- Moses didn't see His face. v. 20 God says 'you cannot see my face, no one may see me and live.'
- Moses was in the tent while God's presence came to the door, v. 9, to talk like friends to
- Veiled by a cloud and a tent, a gracious presence and closeness intimately relationally
- Adam and Eve had that before sin, but now after Sinai God speaks again as to His friend

More on that in a bit, but it takes to a 3rd last point: God goes with His people because of grace

Grace is favor undeserved and unearned, listen for that favor as we listen in at the meeting tent. ¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found **favor in my sight.**’” ¹³ Now therefore, if I have found **favor in your sight**, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find **favor in your sight**. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me [no Hebrew pronoun, NKJV/NAS ‘with us’ in italics as the text moves to plural], do not bring **us** up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found **favor in your sight, I and your people**? Is it not in **your going with us**, so that **we** are distinct, **I and your people**, from every other people on the face of the earth?” ¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found **favor in my sight**, and I know you by name”

- It’s all about favor in God’s sight, it’s all about grace from God who knows you by name
- Earlier Noah found grace--it doesn’t say it about his family--but all with Noah got grace
- God called Abraham by name and covenant grace to bless others with him of all peoples
- Moses isn’t content to have God near his tent, He prays He’ll be with all God’s people
- What a great pattern of prayer in v. 13: ‘*please show me your ways that I may know you*’
- He wants to know more of God’s ways and grace and more for God’s people around him
- He begs don’t let us go from here unless you’re going with us, we’re nothing without you
- Healthy prayer isn’t only or mainly about me, it moves to us, to we, witness to the world
- Because of prayer and because of grace, v. 17 says His presence will go with His people
- Joshua later said ‘your God will be with you wherever you go...don’t be afraid’ Josh 1:9

Israel didn’t deserve it and couldn’t earn it—that’s what grace is!

Neh 9:16–19 NIV ‘...our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked... But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love [Ex 34 quote]. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, ‘This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,’ ...Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them...’

This gives some of the greatest hints of the gospel to come, in the context of Israel’s greatest sin

- Whatever your sin, God in Christ is gracious and will not desert or abandon His people
- The unrepentant don’t enjoy that, but if you bow in faith, He’ll never leave or forsake you
- He knows His own by name, Jesus said, and shows us God’s ways, He is the way, Jn 14:6
- Look at v. 14 and think of Jesus who promises His presence always and ‘*I will give you rest*’
- Don’t be stiff-necked, take His yoke upon your neck, His burden is light compared to sin
- Blessed are those who mourn sin, for they shall be comforted by His gracious presence
- As you help others in sin, with 2 or 3 in His name, He promises to be there in the midst
- As you evangelize sinners, Jesus promises ‘*I am with you always, to the end of the age*’
- As your heart breaks in this sin-cursed world, the Lord is close to the broken-hearted

John Winthrop, one of America’s founding fathers, wrote this of when he became a Christian: “I was now grown familiar with the Lord Jesus Christ... If I went abroad, he went with me, when I returned, he came home with me. I talked with him upon the way, he lay down with me, and usually I did awake with him: and so sweet was his love to me, as I desired nothing but him in heaven or earth.”⁷

All grace in Jesus, who had favor in God’s sight as the beloved God is always well pleased with

- Later another cloud came down, God spoke to a transfigured Jesus with Moses and Elijah
- Lk 9:31 says Moses talked with Jesus about a new exodus about to happen in Jerusalem⁸

- The OT Exodus was a pattern of a greater NT exodus for all those Jesus died for and rose
 - God offers mercy to us through our mediator Jesus, as we look to Him wherever we are
 - We watch Him in His Word and in our life, and should rise up and honor Him in worship
- Heb 7:25 says of *'those who draw near to God through him... he always lives to make intercession for them.'*
- Heb 13:5 says of Jesus *'let us go to him outside the camp... but we seek the city that is to come...'*
 - He calls us to seek first His kingdom of heaven, and He came to seek and to save the lost
 - Like Moses had the pillar at His door, the person of Christ stands at the door and knocks
 - He comes into the life of the repentant in sweet fellowship as they welcome Him by faith
 - There's no more veil or wall separating believers from God, Christ tore it open at Calvary
- Eph 2 says to us *'without God in the world...now in Christ Jesus you who **once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ**... [Paul says the cross has] broken down...the dividing wall...And he came and preached peace to you who were far off... through him we [in Christ] have access in one Spirit to the Father.*
- Believers have access to our Father through the Son and Spirit, not distant, but near 24/7!
 - But that's not all! Eph 2:22 says we even *'become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit'*⁹
 - Israel saw afar God visit a dwelling at the door, but God lives in us now as His dwelling
 - We don't go to a place where He dwells, Eph 3:17 says Jesus dwells in our hearts by faith
 - 2 Cor 5 says our body is now a tent for glory, His gracious presence and closeness in us
- At His last supper before He died for His loved people, He told them in Jn 14:28: *If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him ...15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*
- We speak to Him in prayer and He speaks to us directly in His Word, like friends. PTL!
 - I was once His enemy He made His friend! And what a friend we have in Jesus, amen?!
 - All our sins and griefs He bears, our every weakness, let's take to the Lord in prayer
 - Ex 33 should make us make sure the Lord is with us and in what we're doing or deciding
 - This should motivate us to repent of sin so we can enjoy a deeper friendship fellowship
 - May this move us to talk to Jesus as a friend, share our worries, our problems, our fears
 - All our sorrows He shares, no other friend is so faithful, let's take all to Him in prayer

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

² Nehemiah 9:16 But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands (NIV).

³ 2 Kings 17:14: But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers... (NIV).

Nehemiah 9:29: ... Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. (NIV)

⁴ Jeremiah 17:23 Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline. (NIV).

On stiff-necked people resisting the Holy Spirit and needing spiritual surgery, see Acts 7:51.

⁵ Ps 75:5 NKJV: ...Do not speak with a stiff neck (ESV "with a haughty neck"; NKJV "with insolent pride")

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* Crossway Books, 2005), 986.

⁷ Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Zondervan, 1986), pp. 206, 207.

⁸ The Greek word Luke uses is exodus (translated by some versions "departure").

⁹ NIV.