

# With or without God?

## Exodus 33 - Part 1

You love God... right? Well, let me run a few scenarios past you. Let's imagine that God said to us, 'I'm going to give you a healthy life, a comfortable living, a few amazing life experiences on the way, and a great network of family and friends - but I'm not going to be with you.' How would you feel about that? Honestly?

That's pretty much what most people want in life, and they'd be happy to take that. But what about us, God's people? Are we happy with that idea? Is it actually how we live, if we're honest?

Okay, how about this one - let's imagine God said to us, 'I'm going to give you the new church building, all paid for and ready to go; and this church family will continue to share life together and help each other out through life - but I'm not going to be with you.' How many of us would take that one and be content?

God hasn't promised us any of those things, of course. But here's one He *did* promise us - 'I'm going to give you eternal life. After you die, you will rise again, because you trust in my Son's death and resurrection to make that happen. You will live forever in a perfect, sinless, re-created world. But I'm not going to be with you.' How about that one? Taking all the blessings God has promised us, how would you feel about His forever absence?

Reading Exodus 33 challenges me to think about how we see God. Is He a means to an end for us? Or is He actually the very most precious thing in our lives? At the start of this chapter, God tells His people, the nation of Israel - 'I'm going to give you all the things I promised - a land flowing with milk and honey, a place of peace and security to call your own and live in - but I'm not coming with you.'

The reaction of God's people to that, and especially the reaction of Moses, has a lot to teach us about how vital and precious the presence of God is. In v.4, God's people mourn in distress when they hear God's not with them. Throughout this chapter and the next, Moses pleads to have the presence of God with them, or else everything else is pointless.

Contrast that with today, where many people outside and even *inside* the church couldn't really give a stuff if God is with us or not, as long as He gives them the things they were hoping for.

*How much does the presence of God mean to us? How do we know that?*

The whole book of Exodus is about God, whose name is the LORD, being present with His people. He is present to them in the exodus itself - rescuing them with mighty power. He is present to them in the law that He gives them - here's how to live with and under the rule of God. And He is present to them in the tabernacle that He gives them the design for. A place where they can physically come to know they are people in the presence of the Holy God.

The whole book is about how God's people are distinct from the rest of the world because they are the ones who have God present with them in these ways, ways that nobody else experienced.

So in v.4, God's people find His words to them 'distressing.' No wonder. He says in vv.1-3, 'I'm giving you all I promised, you can have it, but I'm not coming with you - and it's for *your* good, because I might very well turn and destroy you if I did go with you.'

Now this isn't God being fickle or cruel. If you'd read the chapter before this, you'd see what's going on. Whilst Moses was away a long time in God's presence on a mountain, receiving details of the law and details of how the tabernacle was to be constructed, God's people got restless and impatient. They said, 'let's make a god out of gold so we've got something to focus on and follow. Moses has been ages, who knows what's happened to him?'

So they got some of their gold jewellery together, melted it down, and Aaron - Moses own brother and the high priest of God's people, whose job it was to approach the real, holy God on their behalf - he sculpts a golden calf for them to bow down to. It's not that they didn't want to follow the LORD anymore - the chapter says they meant to worship Him, but 'in their own way' (how many times have you heard people say that, by the way?)

But they do this thing that God had told them not to do - they make an idol to bow down to. They'd either forgotten or just chosen to ignore God's command about this, because they got fed up of waiting. And this is what we humans do. When we're fed up of waiting for God to reveal Himself, we start impatiently worshipping idols of our own making.

For us, it isn't golden calfs (I presume). It's whatever we find in front of us that's ready to distract us immediately. So maybe it is something shiny and new. Or someone to touch and hold. Or some place to go where there's no

waiting, just doing. What we don't like is the patience that often accompanies experiencing the presence of God.

But idol worship gets you ruined. There's tragic consequences to the people's disobedience to God. That way lies a short term hit of distraction, meaning or activity in life; followed by death, destruction and division from God and one another. That's what happens in Exodus 32, and what still happens today.

And when God says (twice) in Exodus 33:1-6, 'You are a stiff-necked people,' it's this refusal to turn their heads His way that He's talking about. It's like our heads are fixed on the new and shiny and immediately available thing that we *want* to bow our hearts and imaginations to. We just won't budge to turn our eyes to the glory of God (like Moses wants to at the end of the chapter).

Now you might read all this and think, 'How stupid of these Israelites! They've experienced the actual presence of God giving them the 10 commandments, including 'don't make for yourselves an idol,' and then they make for themselves an idol!

But to give them some credit, when they hear God telling them, 'You can still have the promised land, but you can't have me,' their response is what it needed to be. There's grief, and there's a new obedience.

v.4 says 'they mourned.' It wasn't because God had said 'I might destroy you.' It's because He said He wouldn't (that's why He wasn't coming with, so that He didn't destroy them), but rather God said He would leave them alone. They would be without Him. Now, mourning is what you do when you lose someone you deeply love. And *that* was their response. They grieved the loss of God being present in their lives.

How about us? Would you grieve if God was gone? Many people I know couldn't care less if God was in their life or not. Many who have grown up knowing Him don't feel more than a little nostalgic twinge about not having Him in their lives as adults. I haven't known many people going through a deep grief at losing the presence of God in their lives.

That's partly because of a wonderful gift we have as Christians that we take so, so much for granted. The grace of Jesus to us is that, because of Him, there is *nothing* that can separate us from the love, the embrace, the presence of God. Not our own sin and folly, nor anything else. It ought to

inspire in us a kind of celebration that would be the opposite of the grief we need never feel, the kind of celebration Paul writes with in Romans 8.

Here's the other response of God's people - they start obeying Him afresh. God told them to strip off their ornaments. They got these when they fled from Egypt, and God made the Egyptians hand over items of silver and gold to their fleeing Israelite neighbours. You can read about it in Exodus 12:35-36.

These ornaments were reminders to God's people of God's presence with them and favour to them. But God was telling them to take them off. Those symbols would need to go, along with the relationship with God. It was like taking off a wedding ring for good. But they do what they are told by God. When you know you've been unfaithful to Him, it's never too early to start obeying Him afresh, getting back on course.

*Have you ever known anyone to grieve the loss of a relationship with God?  
(No names)*

In vv.7-11, we read about how much the presence of God means to Moses, and how he makes himself as present to God as He can. And there's much for us to learn from here. First of all, he set up a deliberate place and deliberate time to go and be in the presence of God. He set up a 'tent of meeting.' The point of this tent that he pitched was simple, and it was for one purpose only - it was to meet with God.

He pitched it outside the camp, *some distance away*. It took a bit of time and effort to get away from the noise of the people and everyday work that Moses was surrounded with. But he deliberately set up a clear distance from all that so that he could just meet with God. Not a snatched 5 minutes in between to-do tasks. A set apart time and place to go just for this purpose.

What would be your deliberate, clear-from-the-noise time and place to meet with God? Where is that in your day? In your week? In your month? In your year? For me, I don't always succeed in this, but getting up before the noise and day's tasks begin at 7 to have time in the day to meet God is my practice Tue-Fri. My time in the week is usually a Monday morning, when everyone is away and everything else can wait - could be in the house, could be by the river.

My time to meet God in the month, I'll need to work on. My time in the year that's set aside is a retreat day or two with Heather, just to meet with God for

a whole day. What's your pattern? What could it be, as we get into a new term soon?

There's something about when leaders take time in God's presence that inspires all of God's people to worship too. We read about that in vv.8-10. When Moses went to the tent of meeting, God's people perked up - 'Come out everyone! Look! Moses is going to meet with God! I wonder what's going to happen?' They could see the presence of God descending near to them when their leader took the time to meet with Him.

I wonder what tangible signs of the presence of God we'll see as our leaders truly seek the presence of God. How will it inspire us all to worship more fully in our homes and in our church gatherings? When our Leadership Team pray... When those whose passion is prayer and God's presence show us how... When our Life Group leaders meet with God... When our youth and children's leaders sit awhile with the LORD...

When parents take deliberate time with God once the kids aren't around them, how much more will their children see the presence of God at home? When those older in age and faith seek God's face, how much more will the younger of us see Him in your faces, and your character, and your passing-it-on-from-God wisdom?

In v.11, we read about what happened when Moses met with God. It's not that Moses spoke with Him (although he certainly did, as we read in this and the surrounding chapters). It's that *God spoke with Moses*. Face to face. As a man does with his friend. There were things that *God* wanted to say to *Moses*. And that's what defined these times of prayer.

It's one thing to think about what you're *saying* when you're praying. But what are you *hearing* when you're praying? Do you sit still and quiet long enough to let God say something? I do, more than I used to - although I've got a lot to learn here. Inevitably, when you start doing this, and you think you might be hearing God saying something, you start to question it.

'How do I know that's God and not just me telling myself something?' There's lots of answers to that, perhaps for another day. Briefly, it will be in keeping with Scripture; it may be confirmed by it coming up again a couple of times in the week; and it's likely to be something you recognise isn't normally a 'you' thought.

More related to the passage, which focuses on how God speaks to Moses 'as a man speaks with his friend' - does it have the 'ring of friendship'? Is there challenge in what you're hearing that feels more like it's coming from a friend who loves you than an enemy who condemns you? Is there encouragement in what you're hearing that seems like the cheering on of someone who cares about you?

I'm sure lots of us, like me, have a lot to learn about *listening* to God as we pray, as Moses did. But wherever we are with this, let's be somewhere. Let's learn to sit still enough to let God do some talking as we meet with Him. You'll find it's amazing how quickly that transforms our shopping list, formulaic, duty-like prayers into something far more intimate and real.

The other thing about v.11 is a glimpse into the future that's deeply encouraging. We read that when Moses returned to the camp, his young assistant Joshua would not leave the tent. Joshua was to be the leader of the next generation of God's people. Where the present generation had failed, including later on Moses as their leader, Joshua and his generation would rise up.

And what defined Joshua in these early days was this - he wanted to be in the presence of God even more than Moses did. He loved it. He lingered there. When Moses had to go to get back to the pressing demands of work, Joshua would not go. He wasn't done being with God. Presumably, Moses let him. There's a great deal to be said for a leader or a boss who wants to see their young apprentice stay in God's presence for longer rather than help with the next rota.

And there's even more to be said for a young person who thirsts to be in the presence of God, and won't shift from being there. This week, our teenagers were at Soul Survivor, part of a group of 34 from Inverness churches camping there together. And I get that you experienced the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, and didn't want to leave that.

I pray that you continue to be young people who want to linger in the presence of God. And who actually do that, week by week. That it's what you become known for. O, for a generation who will cling to God's presence! Who will love it more than we have, who will get into habits now that we never did, who will teach us how to love being with God much more like they do!

*What's one thing you could change in your week to be more fully present in meeting with God?*

In vv.12-14 we get a glimpse into one of the conversations that Moses has with God. We'll go more fully into it in a couple of weeks when we look at this chapter again. And what we read about is Moses thirst to know God more and more deeply.

Have a look at v.13. Moses wants to know God's ways better, *so that* he can *know God*. He wants to get as full a view, as close an experience, as God will allow. That's Moses' motive, it's what makes his heart beat faster. He's not interested in having the promised land if he can't have God. His presence. His closeness. His friendship.

And Moses isn't the only one. Paul writes in Philippians 3 that everything's a load of rubbish compared to the 'surpassing greatness of *knowing* Christ Jesus my Lord.' And here's what Jesus Himself says as He has an intimate conversation with His Father in John 17, in the shadow of the cross He's about to go to...

'Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent... Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.'

Do you see what Jesus is saying? Eternal life *is* knowing God! That scenario I gave you at the start - the idea that you could have the promised eternal life in a perfect re-created world, but without the presence of God - it's a contradiction in terms.

What Moses thirsts for - being with God, and seeing His glory - is what Jesus says life is, and what Jesus wants to give to us. It's what He went to the cross for. Jesus died *so that* we could be forgiven and have life forever... and we often stop there, when the sentence should actually continue... *so that* we can always, always be in the presence of God, right now, and forever!

I want to finish by being really clear about this - that because of what Jesus did on the cross, we are all welcome into the presence of God if we'll come, *and there is no more threat or possibility of God ever removing His presence from us*. That is far more wonderful a gift than the great majority of us have treated it.

They say that you don't know what you have until it's gone. Let's learn to treasure the presence of God as the greatest thing life can offer us, both in

this life and the next. Because of Jesus, it isn't gone, and it can't be. The greatest way to be grateful to Him for that is to take the gift He's given and enjoy it!