

The Presence of God

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[0 : 00] Well, you may have heard it reported recently that three-quarters of the Church of England priests say Britain can no longer be described as a Christian country. And this is from a survey conducted by the Times newspaper, which polled 1,200 serving priests. And I don't think it's surprising, really, that the Church of England priests are really for us to hear that Britain can no longer be described as a Christian country. But what I found was fascinating was the response of Rod Liddell, who is one of my favourite writers or journalists.

He wrote a great essay in the Times, and it had this title, Great, We Banished Christianity, Now We're Stuck in a Moral Wilderness. And Liddell, essentially, in his piece, blames the Church of England by saying it has jettisoned Christianity and replaced it with liberal grandstanding. And he himself, not a Christian, says, I am not entirely sure there is a God, but I do know that the retreat of Christianity in our country, or more properly, our collective retreat from it, has enormously diminished us, both as individuals and as a society. And so what he does in his piece is go on and give examples of how rejecting Christianity in our land has made life worse for us because he says that Christianity worked. And then he ends with the question, we do not seem to be any happier now, do we? And so as a secular person, Rod Liddell has reached a conclusion that the Church of England had completely missed. And yet it is a conclusion that deep down all of us actually know to be true, even if we don't like it. It is that life is not better without God. Life, in fact, is worse without God. It's worse for us as individuals, and clearly it is worse for us as a society. And that is certainly the experience of the Israelites in Exodus chapter 33 and 34, which was read for us. The Israelites didn't want a future without God's presence with them.

They wanted to go on into the future with God. And that is really the focus of these two chapters. They are about the presence of God with his people. And it applies to us because it makes us ask whether we want the presence of God with us. Do we want God in our lives? Do we want him to be with us or not?

And so let's consider this under three headings. First of all, we see about needing the presence of God. Secondly, knowing the presence of God. And thirdly, experiencing the presence of God. So first of all, needing the presence of God. The Israelites needed the presence of God. That was clear to them.

[3 : 01] But listen to what God says. Verse 1 to 3. The Lord said to Moses, So do you hear what God is saying there? God is saying, I'm still going to give you the promised land and all the good things that come with it, but you won't have my presence with you.

But why? Essentially, we know from the incident of the golden calf in Exodus chapter 32, that the problem was Israel's sin. They were a stiff-necked people. In other words, they were disobedient. And so for their own safety, God would not go with them because he says he might destroy them. And so they would experience God's blessing, but not God's presence.

Which I think is actually the deal that most modern people would want to do with God. Well, yes, God, give me the blessings in life. Give me security, prosperity, good life, good health, all of these things.

But without you, without your presence, without you getting in the way and spoiling my life. I guess a lot of people want to enjoy all the good things God gives, but they're not really interested in a personal relationship with God.

[4 : 48] And perhaps that's you. And if you're exploring Christianity, it is certainly not about coming to God and then having a good life. It is about coming to God and being in relationship with the God who made you.

And so here, the Israelites don't think this is such a good deal. Given the option, they want God's presence more than they want God to give them good things in life. So verse 4 says, when the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. So this was no delight for the people. This was a disaster for them. And the people mourned because they knew their sin meant that they deserved God's punishment.

Their idolatry with the golden calf was really an all-time low for Israel. Which makes this whole episode a crisis point in the Exodus story. Because the point of the Exodus was, God delivered his people from Egypt so that he might dwell with them.

And gave his presence to them. And so this is devastating for them to imagine life without the presence of God. And that's why they removed all their ornaments.

[6 : 03] This was a sign of repentance, stated in verse 5 and 6. This was acknowledging before God that they had broken covenant with him. And so the situation was serious.

Now it's not as if God had lost his cool here. Because God is not some kind of divine, incredible Hulk. Where sometimes he is like Bruce Banner, who is the calmest and the kindest member of the Avengers.

And then at other times he suddenly erupts into a rage, rips off his clothes, turns green and then fights everybody. No, there's not that kind of personality change in God.

God is saying what would happen if he responded to Israel and their sin with perfect justice. He would have to destroy them. And so this is like the Israelites were all booked in for their expenses paid trip to the promised land.

And yet their guide said he's no longer going with them. And so the plans for the tabernacle, remember a few chapters back. The plans for the tabernacle, the place where God would dwell with his people, are essentially shelved.

[7 : 13] And God says he's going to send his angel with his people instead. And so there's this great tension here as the presence of the holy God will not go with the sinful people.

And yet the resolution to this tension comes with Moses. Because these chapters, 32 to 34, essentially have Moses interceding on behalf of the people to God.

So Moses was the one man who could meet with God. The one man who could speak with God face to face. And so this happened in a tent of meeting outside the camp.

It's mentioned there in verse 7. And it comes up again in verse 11 where we read, The Lord would speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to camp.

And so Moses had access to the presence of God, the only one that did. And the people knew that they needed access to God as well. And that's why in verse 10, they stood and worshipped when this cloud of God's presence came down when Moses was in the tent.

[8 : 23] But while God said his people would lose his presence, Moses is not prepared to accept this. So look at verse 12 and 13. Moses said to the Lord, You have been telling me, lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.

You have said, I know you by name, and you have found favour with me. If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favour with you.

Remember that this nation is your people. That's Moses acting as the mediator for the people. He is pleading with God on their behalf, reminding God, God, these are your people.

God, they're yours. So God replies, verse 14, My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. God promises his presence, but Moses keeps going.

Verse 15, Then Moses said to him, if your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. He said, angel or no angel, God, there is no point in going forward if you are not with us.

[9 : 35] And so Moses wants to secure God's dwelling among his people. And so God says, verse 17, The Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you, and I know you by name.

And yet Moses presses on. He's in dialogue with God here. Verse 18, Then Moses said, now show me your glory. He's pleading with God for God to reveal himself to Moses.

But I think this is more than just a personal request, because Moses wants God to demonstrate what he has just promised he would do. Because Moses has done his maths homework, and he's realised that everything in life minus God equals nothing.

Which is something I guess our contemporary culture fails to see. Because we were made for far more than what this material world has to offer us.

And so we can have everything that this world values, security, health, wealth, good things, great prospects, but still never find true satisfaction in life.

[10:46] C.S. Lewis put it like this in his sermon, which then was an essay, *The Weight of Glory*. He said, It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. And so what Exodus reminds us is that we were made for a relationship with the living God.

That's what the Israelites needed, and they knew it. And that's what we need too. And I wonder if we know it. Because it is the presence of God in our lives that will bring the greatest satisfaction in life.

And it will bring lasting pleasure to us. So that's our first point, needing the presence of God. The second point is knowing the presence of God. So Moses said to God, Show me your glory.

[11:53] And just look at how God responded, verse 19 and 20. And the Lord said, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But, he said, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.

That is a kind of yes and no answer, isn't it? Yes, God would reveal more of himself, but no, Moses couldn't see the full glory of God because he'd die.

And so God reveals himself here, not just by what he does, but by what he says. Because God gives an insight into his character, into his nature, which helps make sense, not just of this episode, but of God's dealings with humanity, including us.

Since God's revelation here, it's less about what Moses saw, and it's more about what Moses heard. Because the emphasis here is on what God says about himself.

[13:00] Because God proclaims his name, and God defines his nature. In fact, God's revelation here, in Exodus chapter 34, verse 6 and 7, his revelation becomes this significant statement that is often repeated all the way through the Old Testament.

That's why we had it at the start from Psalm 145, and why we sang it from Psalm 143 earlier in our service. So what does God reveal about himself?

Just look at verse 6 and 7. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, Now that is a fantastic summary of what God is like.

And it's repeated again and again, as we've said in the Bible. It tells us the Lord is gracious and compassionate. The Lord is slow to anger. The Lord is abiding in love and faithfulness.

The Lord maintains his love. He forgives wickedness and rebellion and sin. It is an amazing description of what God is like. But there's more, because God also says that he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

[14:30] So God's love and God's forgiveness doesn't mean that God won't punish. He must punish all who are guilty of sin, because he is just.

And so there's a real tension here in these verses and in this story, because on the one hand, God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving.

But on the other hand, God also does not leave the guilty unpunished. So one great truth about God is followed by another great truth about God.

And so how do they go together? How can God forgive sin, and yet insist that sin must be punished? And it's interesting because it is not explained here, but it is a tension that runs all the way through the Old Testament, as it moves the Bible story forward.

And so what we pick up here in Exodus, is that God's forgiveness is never easy, and God's forgiveness is not simple. Because God wants his people to enjoy his presence, and yet God's presence can't tolerate sin.

[15:44] And so how can we have an intimate relationship, a covenant relationship, with God, if he can't stand our sin?

What is going to win out in the end? Will it be God's love that will win, or will it be his forgiveness that will win? Sorry, will it be his love and forgiveness that will win, or will it be his justice and his punishment that wins?

What is God going to do, ultimately, forgive or punish? Because what God says about himself here encapsulates this seeming contradiction.

And it's a great tension that needs to be resolved here, as Moses interacts with God, but also all the way through the Old Testament. And ultimately, this tension is resolved in the coming, the life and death and work of Jesus.

And so we read in Romans chapter 3 that God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood. He did this so as to be just.

[16:50] And the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. And so in Romans chapter 3, we're being told that the cross tells us, or the death of Jesus tells us, that God can be both just and punish sin, and yet be loving and forgive sinners.

And so what wins out God's loving forgiveness or God's just punishment? Well, the answer is both, through the saving work of Jesus on the cross.

And it's because Jesus suffered and died on the cross that God can forgive our sin when we put our faith in Jesus. And that's why the God who revealed himself to Moses is the same God who revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the very definition of God. Which is actually something that was confirmed to Moses on another mountain. Remember in the Gospels, in the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses saw the glorified Lord Jesus.

Where Moses was in the presence of the same glorious God he met on Mount Sinai, but this time it was in the person of his Son. And so Moses could look, not at the back of God, but on the glory of God that shone from the face of Jesus.

[18:20] And so it's in Jesus that we can know God and see God's glory. And that's why John says, at the beginning of his Gospel, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. So John is saying there that Jesus came and tabernacled with us.

And we have seen his glory. Not only that, but he's saying he is full of grace and truth. Grace, love, mercy, forgiveness, but also truth, justice, punishment.

In fact, John's language virtually echoes what's said in Exodus chapter 33 and 34. He says again at the beginning of his Gospel, John chapter 1, verse 18, no one has ever seen God, but the only, the one and only Son who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father has made him known.

What he's saying is to know Jesus is to know God. And so if we are going to experience the presence of God in our lives, then we need to receive Jesus by faith.

[19:38] And then we become the place of God's dwelling as he comes and lives in us by his Holy Spirit. And then one day, God will take us into his very presence in his new creation.

And that's when we will see him face to face. And so can you see how God's revelation to Moses here is part of God's bigger and greater plan for all humanity?

God wants to dwell with his people. That relationship was broken just after the creation of the fall. God is restoring it here through Moses and the tabernacle and then the temple.

And then ultimately, we will see God face to face through faith in Jesus in God's new creation. And so what Moses is doing here in conversing with God is ultimately pointing to Jesus as the only possible way for God to dwell with us despite our sin.

And so the question is, well, do you know the presence of God with you? Because you can through Jesus Christ. Perhaps life is difficult right now and you're struggling.

[20:56] Well, Jesus is compassionate and he cares about your situation. Maybe you're burdened by what you've done and you're weighed down by the guilt of your sin.

Well, God is gracious. He is slow to anger. And Jesus came to die to forgive that very sin. Maybe you're filled with worry about this or that or the next thing.

Well, Jesus is abounding in love and faithfulness. And so his love for you doesn't ever change. And he's promised to never leave you or forsake you.

It's interesting, I find that people are often quick to tell me that they don't believe in God when they realise what I do. When it comes up that I'm a minister, there's a bit of an occupational hazard, whether it's in the barber shop or the garage or whatever, because people are so quick to tell me what they think and what they don't believe.

And so I tend to just ask them, okay, you don't believe in God? Well, just describe to me the God that you don't believe in. And then they describe the God they don't believe in.

[22 : 05] And then I end up saying, well, I don't actually believe in that God either. Because he is not the God who has revealed himself to us in his word, the Bible, or he's not the God who has revealed himself to us so wonderfully in his son, Jesus Christ.

One who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving, wickedness, rebellion and sin.

And yet we'll punish all the injustice that we want to see punished in our world. That's the God who's worth believing in, isn't he? Okay, so meeting the presence of God, secondly, knowing the presence of God, and then thirdly, experiencing the presence of God.

So after the glory of God passed by Moses and God revealed his character to Moses, what did Moses do? He bowed down to worship. And yet he continued to plead with God on behalf of the people.

So, verse 8 and 9, chapter 34, Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped. Lord, he said, if I have found favour in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us.

[23 : 18] Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin and take us as your inheritance. Now this is a bold request because Moses here wasn't asking God to give Israel their inheritance in the land.

What he's actually asking is that God would take his people as his inheritance. He's pleading with God, saying, God, take these people as your treasure, as your most prized possession.

I guess this is like a man or a woman who has just committed adultery, not just to ask their spouse to take them back, but to ask their spouse to make them their treasure, their love, their joy, their delight.

And so Moses here is not defending the people's behaviour, but he is pleading on the basis of what God has just said so that God would forgive their sin and restore their broken relationship, their covenant relationship.

And that is exactly what happens. God renews his covenant with his people. Verse 10, Then the Lord said, I am making a covenant with you before all your people.

[24 : 28] I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you.

And so what we get here is a resolution to the crisis. God's saying, I won't go with you, but I'll take you to the promised land. Now he's saying, I'm your God.

And we get this resolution because God reestablishes his covenant with Israel. And only then do we get back to the tabernacle which had been shelved, remember, the place where God's presence would dwell with his people.

And so how does this happen? Well it happens through Moses, the mediator, through Moses' intercession for the people.

And so the story picks up again in chapter 35 where it left off. chapter 32. Remember, instructions for the tabernacle, then the golden calf, sin, rebellion, and then we return to God's covenant, and then the construction of the tabernacle.

[25 : 38] And in between, Moses is interceding with God, and so what we're being told here is that Moses' intercession was a success. because it's through Moses pleading with God and through God revealing his name and his nature and ensuring his glory that God restores his covenant.

And it's not because Moses had somehow persuaded God to change his mind, but because God's sovereign will was being put into effect through Moses and his intercession.

and it simply highlights for us God's desire to forgive his people's sin through their mediator. With Moses pleading for the people at God's invitation, the people do end up becoming the place where God dwells among them.

And they enjoy his blessing. And so as the mediator, Moses plays this crucial role representing the people to God and representing God to the people.

And so verse 35, it gets even more intimate in the relationship that Moses has with God. Verse 34 and 35. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face.

[27 : 01] But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant.

Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord. So can you see Moses is going in and out of God's presence, interceding with God for God's presence to be with his people.

And when Moses went in to speak with God, he kept his face unveiled. And then when Moses spoke to the people, they saw his face radiant and shining. But then Moses would put the veil back over his face again.

Now Paul, the apostle, picks up on this in 2 Corinthians chapter 3. And he says that Moses would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. Because the glory, the radiance would fade. And so Paul is saying that the fading glory indicates the temporary nature of the old covenant with Moses as the mediator.

[28 : 15] And Paul is saying that it points to the need for a new covenant with Jesus as the mediator. Where the glory of God is now seen in the face of Jesus.

No longer in Moses' dealings with God, but in Jesus. Jesus. And that's why Paul goes on to say in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

And now this is where all this applies to us. Because Paul was speaking to the Jews of his day who had rejected Jesus Christ. And he's saying it was as if there was a veil over their hearts that stopped them from seeing the glory of God in Jesus.

And yet it's the same today. Because it's only when people see Jesus for who he is that the veil is taken away. And so Exodus chapter 32 to 34 provides the backdrop for Jesus as the true and better mediator between the holy God and sinful people like us.

because Jesus took on our humanity. He became the God man. And so Jesus is able to represent God to us far better than Moses.

[29 : 41] And Jesus is able to represent us to God. And that's why the personal work of Jesus is the only solution to the problem of our sin against God.

And so in Jesus Christ's tension between a compassionate and gracious God who is willing to forgive sin and yet must also punish sin is resolved.

Because the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that Jesus willingly lost the presence of God on the cross so that we need to never lose the presence of God, so that we could enjoy it forever.

forever. And as we gaze on his glory, the glory of Jesus Christ, then we are being transformed into something glorious too, which is remarkable.

Remember, Moses was radiant when he experienced God's presence, but the radiance would fade, but like a torch that runs out of batteries. And so if we are going to experience the presence of God in our lives, then, well, we must listen to God's voice as he speaks to us through his word.

[30 : 54] We must trust in his covenant promises to us. We must obey his commands. We must live by his spirit and we must talk to him in prayer because there is nothing more important in life than knowing God's presence with us.

And so the question as we close is, do you know God's presence with you? You can. God invites you to know him and experience his presence by believing in Jesus.

And it's when we receive Jesus by faith that God is with us. And he will never leave us when he is with us. His presence will go with us through this life, through our death, and into eternity.