

The Living Presence of God

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[0 : 0 0] Here's a question. What difference would it make to your life if God was really, truly, physically, literally present with you as your friend?

And you knew that. Not spiritually, really, physically and truly, like we've seen in the book of Exodus. Just choose any one of the times that God has pitched up in Exodus and have that as your guiding thought for this moment.

What have we seen of God in Exodus? We've seen God in a burning bush. That would be pretty cool. A bush that doesn't burn. If any of you walked in there with a bush that doesn't burn, we would start listening to you.

People would want to know what's going on with you. We've seen God with Moses taking a stick, turning into a snake. Again, if any of you could do that, that would be pretty cool.

We've seen God in plagues and hails and storms and thunder and death. And if you got control of that kind of a God, that would be pretty cool.

[1 : 2 2] I'm assuming you think it's cool. Okay. I think it's cool. We've seen God in a pillar of fire and smoke and thunder and lightning consume an entire mountain.

And if you could take that kind of God with you, what would happen to your life?

You wouldn't have any bullies at school, that's for sure. You wouldn't have any problems at work, that's for sure. What would happen to your fears?

Did you agree with me that your fears would just evaporate, kind of? You'd be like, well, what's the problem? I've got a pillar of fire and cloud walking with me. There's nothing to be afraid of over here. What would happen to your inadequacies? Wondering if you can do what God wants you to do. When you see him in action like that, what does it do to your faith?

[2 : 3 0] If that kind of God was with you, what plans would you make? Knowing that he's going to help you. And not only can't you fail, but you're going to succeed in a way that, ha, can you imagine the success you've got if that kind of power is available to you, if he's your friend?

I think it would make a huge difference in our lives if God was literally walking around with us in our daily life. We're going to see in our story today that this kind of power that God displays in Exodus is actually available to us as Christians.

It's just at a different place, and it does something different. It's not out there. It's inside of us. And it's strange.

We've got this promise of God being with us, being present with us, his people, this huge amount of power, and yet we live like it's not true. I don't know about you, but I would struggle to.

I've never seen a pillar of fire and cloud. It would be quite cool. Imagine you were there in Exodus as one of the Israelites. Well, today's story is about how, because of sin, the Israelites nearly blew their first big chance of having God's presence with them.

[4 : 0 0] We've seen it already start in last week with the episode of the golden calf. So they nearly blew their first big chance of having God present with them, because of their sin.

But because of their repentance and because of mediation and the intercession of Moses, God changes his mind and restores them to covenant relationship with him.

And we're talking about real power here, because it's God. We're going to uncover how, in order to experience the presence of God in our lives, we need to take action.

We need to take action against our sins. And we need someone who mediates God's glory to us.

So the first point we're going to look at is needing or wanting the presence of God.

Needing or wanting the presence of God. So the golden calf episode was a disaster, just to give us some context. It pushes Israel's covenant relationship with God to the breaking point.

[5 : 01] God is about ready to send them packing off into the wilderness, and Moses can sense impending disaster for his people. The problem is, God is going to send them off without his presence.

And Moses knows that without his presence, without the presence of God, they're nothing. They can get the land, God promises them the land, but Moses knows unless God goes with them, they're not really going to get anything.

So we look at the first few verses. Chapter 33, Then the Lord said to Moses, Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt. Okay, notice that.

It's your people, not my people. I want nothing to do with this lot. You go. And go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, I'll give it to your descendants.

I did promise on oath. Yeah, I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll send an angel before you and drive out all the people. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. All these cool things I've promised you.

[6 : 03] He's kind of rubbing their face in it a little bit. But I will not go with you. Because you're a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.

Now, we've all taken that car trip with our parents, across the Karoo on the holiday, and the kids are getting a bit raucous at the back, and in the hand of God, comes around from the front, sorting them out.

God is sending them on a trip, and he doesn't want to go with them, because he's so angry, because they're so stiff-necked, they don't want to listen to him.

So God is sending them off without him. And this is in stark contrast to the whole point of Sinai, and the tabernacle, which we've seen for weeks and weeks and weeks. They're to have God's presence with them the whole time.

And they knew what that presence meant. That presence meant. Protection from the enemies, as we saw, coming out of Exodus from Egypt. Provision for daily living, in the manna, and the water that they got in the desert.

[7 : 12] And promise of future blessing. So those three things, you want God with you, if those are the three things he can give you. Protection from your enemies, provision for daily living, and promise of future blessing.

And they've seen it in full color, full HD, full HK, full 3D. What do you get if you get those cool big screens? Someone must have those cool, like, you know, when you watch a movie, and it's in full display?

Yeah, well, okay. They've seen it. None of you have got those TVs. Okay. They've seen it. They've seen it in front of their very eyes. They've seen God take action on their behalf.

The miracles, and the plagues, and the water, and the fire, and the mountain experience. But it's totally meaningless to have those blessings, or any blessings from God, if you don't have God with you.

The amazing things as blessings are, if God isn't with him, those things won't seem to work. Those signs didn't seem to work. They need something more.

[8 : 20] That power that they saw was proof of God's presence with them, but the power was outside of them. It was over there. What I'll show you is that if you're a Christian, you've got that kind of power, or rather powerful presence, of God inside of us, which speaks to a closeness of relationship, and a power that the Old Testament people of God never had.

But we do, if we trust and obey Christ. So, jump over to John chapter 14. We're going to work a little bit backwards in those verses.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and he's speaking to them about how God is going to be with them, how he's not going to be for a short while, but that he's not going to leave them empty-handed, because they've got work to do, and they need power to do it, and he's going to give it to them.

So, have a look at verse 23. Jesus said, so John chapter 14, verse 23, Jesus said, anyone who loves me, will obey my teaching, and then, my Father will love them.

So, if they love me, God automatically loves them, because they love me, Jesus. And then, we, Jesus and the Father, will come to them, and make our home with them.

[10 : 00] There's a tabernacle word that we've come across, a dwelling word, the being word, the presence word. So, to get God's presence in our lives, we don't go back to Old Testament times, and have to wait for God to pull people out of a foreign land, and pitch up on a mountaintop with

fire.

If we want to have the God of the universe that does that in our lives, we've got to come to Christ. So, coming to Jesus, you get Jesus, and you get God the Father.

Then, work backwards down to verse 15. 15 and 16. If you love me, keep my commands, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you, and be with you forever.

The Spirit of Truth. So, if you love Jesus, you get the Father, he's going to ask the Father, and then you get another helper, the Holy Spirit, who will be with you, constantly, always, never ending.

Isn't that amazing? There's three in one deals. But wait, there's more. Have a look at verse 12.

[11:18] So, what... Well, let's just read verse 12, and verse 13, and 14. It's got, Truly I tell you, whoever believes in me, will do the works I've been doing.

So, the word works, it can also kind of mean miracle. It's power word. Will do the powerful works I've been doing. The miracles. And they will do even greater things than these, because I'm going to the Father.

And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask. You may ask me for anything, in my name.

And I will do it. Now, doesn't that sound like some serious power available to you? It's not just to His disciples. It's to all Christians.

And not Christians individually, but to the church of God as a whole, as we meet together as God's people. There's a power available to us, and a presence worth having.

[12:26] And what's needed to get this is faith. Christ is calling people to trust in Him. And when they do, He's got the right and the authority to unleash the power of the Father and the Son inside your life, and through you to others.

I don't know about you, but I think that's a gift, and a blessing worth having. And you can only have it if you come to Christ. It's the only way available to us now. Jesus, in that same passage, says, I'm the way, and the truth, and the life.

You can't get to God in any other way. So it's definitely worth having that person in your life, because you get the presence of God the Father, the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, and Christ Himself.

And then He promises, when you need anything, you ask Him, and He's got the power to give it to you. Which is why, if you've got sin in your life, you really want to deal with it as directly as you can. We need to start doing serious work of repenting of sin in your life, because it's the number one thing that will block the joy, and the power, and the presence of God in your life.

[13:42] So, come back with me to Exodus, and see how Israel dealt with sin in their life. So back to Exodus 33. So we're going to look at the need for genuine repentance.

The need for genuine repentance. If you want to have this presence, the ongoing, outflowing presence of God in our lives. So back in our text, back in Exodus 33, God is really angry with His people.

It doesn't do for us to downplay the anger that God is feeling. In just the previous chapter, I mean, just in the previous few verses, the Levites killed 3,000, and God finished off a fair number of the rest with the plague.

What's amazing is that He doesn't wipe them all out, because He's got the covenant right. They've broken covenant with Him. He's got the absolute right to kill them all off. That's in fact what happens when you take covenant ceremony.

You walk through the sacrificed animals, we've been doing this in our confirmation classes, and they're reminded that as you walk down, the two kings talk to each other. They say, listen, if you break the terms of my covenant, you see what happened to that animal over there?

[15:03] You see the entrails lying around? Yeah, those are going to be your and your children's entrails if you double cross me. Do you capisce? Say yes. Okay, do you see that sacrificed lamb with the head off?

Yeah. That's going to be yours if you double cross me. Do you capisce? Yes, boss. So God has the right when He makes a covenant and people don't keep it to finish them off.

And so, it's amazing how you see God's anger displayed here, but also God's grace. But what's needed to access that is genuine repentance.

God is about to withdraw His presence with no promise that He will ever be back. Yeah, you can take an angel, go get that land that I promised you.

I'm not going. Because if I go, I'm going to thin out your numbers. And, thankfully, the Israelites realized that it was their sin that was their problem.

[16:04] And then they do two things that is required by God if His people are going to make right or fix their relationship with Him when they mess it up with sin. And so, genuine repentance in this passage looks like it's heartfelt.

Genuine repentance is heartfelt. And genuine repentance requires concrete action. So those two things. Genuine repentance is heartfelt and genuine repentance requires concrete action.

So have a look at verse 4 to verse 6. And God says it twice. Okay, just in case they didn't hear the first time. I can't go with you. You stiff-necked people, I just might destroy you.

So when the people heard verse 4 these distressing words, when the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments.

For the Lord had said to Moses, tell the Israelites, you are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and then I will decide what to do with you.

[17:10] So, the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb. Now you might think that's a very strange way to show repentance. I don't know if you've ever shown repentance by taking all your jewelry off.

But it's not quite talking about that. So let's look at their heartfelt remorse. Their heartfelt repentance. They had genuine heartfelt remorse.

They mourned for their sins. They mourn for their sins. And so, one thing you've got to do when you realize that you've messed up with God and you want His presence, you need to realize that your sin blocks that presence off.

And you need to start feeling real remorse. Now, if you're a Christian, it kind of happens automatically, but sometimes it doesn't, you know, sometimes that remorse doesn't find its way to you.

But it is a genuine feeling inside your heart. If you've felt it, you'll know what I'm talking about. But if you've hurt anyone, you'll know what I'm talking about. If you've hurt anyone that you have a relationship with, that you care about, if you've done something either on purpose or by mistake, and you've done something wrong that they didn't like, and they've let you know, most of us will go, oh, you get that horrible knot in your stomach and your chest and you might even break out in a sweat.

[18:32] Real remorse. But God wants, and God wants this kind of repentance when we come to Him. And it's feeling sorry, it's really feeling sorry, but it's not because they're being caught out.

Not feeling sorry here because you got caught out. It's knowing that they're putting their relationship with God on the line. And that's the kind of repentance that God wants.

A real feeling of genuine sorrow for the things that you've done wrong against other people and against Him. Not just saying it like we say, as we do, confessing our sins.

That's part of it. It's a good thing to do. But unless you have real sorrow in your heart, feel bad about it, just feeling really bad, yucky, it may be that you haven't genuinely repented of some sins in your life.

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector? I'll read it for us. The Pharisee stood by himself. It's in Luke chapter 18. You can check it later.

[19:38] Don't worry about going there now. The Pharisee stood by himself on one side and prayed, God, I thank you that I'm not like the other people. Robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this little tax collector here.

I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get. He's not, that doesn't sound like he's sorry about his sins. Doesn't sound like he's making himself right.

But then there's a tax collector on the other side. And he stood at a distance. A little bit like the Israelites in our passage in Exodus 33.

They knew they were in the wrong. So they didn't go and join Moses at their tent of meeting. They just sort of stayed there at their tents. Just looked. The tax collector stood at a distance.

He would not even look up to heaven. But he beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[20:37] And you can feel and you know that he knows it. And Jesus' response, I tell you that this man rather than the other one went home justified before God.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled. But those who humble themselves will be exalted. And yet, too many Christians stop at just saying sorry for their sins.

You can't just say sorry and keep on doing the same thing that damages the relationship. Do you remember a famous televangelist? Oh, I'm going to say Jimmy Carter, but that's an American president.

Swaggart. Yeah. He found his way to a prostitute. Oh, he's very sorry. The tears. Very sorry. Comes back to the pulpit. Oops. He does it again.

This time he's really sorry. More tears. Back to the pulpit. Oops. He does it again. No, this time he's really, really sorry. More tears. We all know that if we keep doing that, the relationship with the other person will eventually break.

[21 : 51] They'll break it off. If you keep doing something that they don't like, even though you say sorry, it's a pathological bad relationship and so the other thing that we need for genuine repentance is concrete action to stop the thing that is causing sin and that's where these Israelites taken off their ornaments, their bangles, et cetera, comes into it.

They took concrete action. They stripped themselves of the offending symbols of sin. They took off their jewelry. It's kind of like their party jewelry and their party clothes. It's not like, so all the ladies are sitting here with jewelry on.

It's not the jewelry you wear to church. It's if you had to go to a swish party and you've got the cocktail dress and you've got the real gold chains, I don't know, a tiara.

Like, has anyone been to tiara? No one wears that. No. Yeah, if you've been to what they call a rave, you know the rave things, the rave parties, out in the trans parties, out in the burning man stuff, who's, well, people get dressed up, okay, when they go to these parties and let me just put it this way, if they come here and church on a Sunday, they would be like, well, you know, you need to go put some clothes on and so that's probably what the Israelites have got here.

They've just come from a golden calf situation and they'd still doled up and now they realize what they've done and instead of having a party and feeling, oh, you know, people who go to these parties are very arrogant and pride, you know, all these parties and these pride things, pride thing behind them and now they're like, ooh, they're just feeling very ashamed, they're probably trying to cover up their nakedness and they just look at the stuff they've got and they're like, oh, this is ashes and dust.

[23 : 41] It felt good but now we can see compared to God, if we're going to lose God, then all the stuff we've got is, I don't want that. It took away the things that appeared shiny where they could pretend to be someone else and they started to get real with God and so genuine repentance involves tripping ourselves of any pretense and getting rid of the thing that is tripping us up and stripping off.

They didn't just take it off and put their niti on the side, they took it off and they probably threw it away in disgust, hating what they had, they suddenly saw what they were. The stripping off indicates an eagerness, bordering on violence to throw away, to get rid of, to have nothing to do with a thing that causes offense.

And friends, we've got to deal with like, like that with sin in our life. We've got to get violent with it. We've got to be eager to get rid of it. It's not something that's just going to go away by itself. It wants to stay.

It wants you. Do you remember the story of Cain and Abel? And God said, yeah, sin is like a wild animal crouching behind you. You need to fight it off.

You can fight it off. Well, he wasn't able to, so this is the thing. You've only got a fighting chance if you've got Christ because he's the only one who's managed to fight sin off.

[25 : 11] And so his power becomes your power. But sin is a thing that wants to get you. It's trying to kill you. So you've got to put up a fight to try and kill it. And that's why you've got Jesus saying things like, if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

We've got to get radical. We've got to put an all-out war, wage an all-out war against sin in our lives. We've looked at Ephesians recently. See, now I've got to put on the full armor of God and you put on armor not when you're going to go and buy chickens at the market.

You put on armor when you're going to go and face your enemy and do battle. And sin is a big problem in our lives. You tell me whether you think you're fighting it strong enough. And if you don't, and you don't fight it with Christ at your side, it's going to take you and it's going to stop God from being present in your life.

[26 : 32] Now, none of us live consistently repentant lives. We're always having to deal with indwelling sin and this is why we need a mediator. We need someone like Moses who can get close to God who's friends with God and then somehow manage to say, look, Lord, I'm friends with you.

This is what Moses does in our Exodus 33 passage. So these guys are with me. Is it okay if they can be friends? But it doesn't actually work out for them. And so, we need someone like Moses who can get us close to God who's friends with God but we need someone who's unlike Moses who goes beyond what he did and who actually makes us friends with God.

and of course that person is Christ. And so the last point is we need to, if we want God's presence in our life, we need, we need a mediator like Christ.

So in order to get God's abiding presence, we need more than repentance from our side. We need it. You can't have it without it. You can't be with God or have God with you if you're just going to continue and sin in your life.

But we need more than that because sin is going to stay in our life. It's a lifelong battle. What we need is an intercessor that is going to bring two offended parties together and get them to be friends.

[27 : 53] And Moses seemingly does an amazing job of it. Verse 12 to 17, he takes up this mediator mantle and he does a pretty good job.

Let's have a look back in Exodus 33, 12 onwards. Moses says to the Lord, Lord, you've been telling me lead these people but you haven't let me know whom you will send with me.

And you've said, I know you by name and you have found favor with me. He's reminding God, hey, God you like me.

We're friends. If you're pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people too.

He reminds God that God likes him and he asks God to teach you more about himself so that he can teach his people so that they can get better at being friends with God. And then he gets it.

[28 : 54] God says, okay, verse 14, my presence will go with you and I'll give you rest. All right, I'll go with you. You're my friend, I'll go with you. And Moses says, well, he takes that one next step.

But if your presence doesn't go with us, don't send us from here. How will anyone know that you're pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?

So he's pushing to have God be with his people. And God says, okay, I'll do that. I will do everything you've asked because I'm pleased with you and I know you by name.

Now just pause there for a moment. The God of the universe who is beyond angry with his people because he's friends with one of them says, okay, I'll forgive.

I'll relent. Instead of sending you off without me, I'll come with you. Isn't that amazing? I think it's amazing. And then Moses, I don't know what he was thinking, whether he thought, okay, me and God are now friends.

[30 : 05] Lord, just show me your glory while we're at it. And God's like, eh, eh, no, no, no. I'll cause my goodness to pass in front of you and listen, I'm going to proclaim my name in your presence and he links mercy and grace to his name and we're going to look at that more next week about the mercy and graciousness and compassion of God but you can't see me and live.

I mean, this is an incredible story and it's difficult to know what's going on. God is gracious, God is friends with Moses but there's a boundary that Moses can't cross.

He can't see God's glory and live. And this is where Moses' role as mediator breaks down. He's friends with God but he can't get others to be friends with God.

Not in the same way that God has chosen him to be a friend. God is going to tolerate his people for now. We'll see what he does next week but it doesn't sound like he's friends with him the same way that he's with Moses.

Speaking to him face to face. He hasn't done that since Genesis. Since Adam and Eve and since Jacob wrestled with God at Peniel when he saw him face to face and was like oh, I just wrestled with God.

[31 : 33] So Moses' role as a mediator breaks down because he can't get others to be friends with God. And friends, this is why Jesus again is so important for us. The person we need, he's the person we need that can protect us from God's glory.

Just have a look at what it will do to Moses. He says, verse 20, I'll pass in front of you, Moses. I'll show you what I can but, verse 20, he said, you cannot see my face for no one may see me and live. And then God is even more gracious.

Doesn't just tell Moses to scoot off and watch his manners. Okay, look, the Lord says, there's a place near me where you may stand on a rock and when my glory passes by, I'll put you in a cliff of the rock and cover you with my hand until I've passed by.

then I'll remove my hand and you'll see my back but my face must not be seen. Isn't that incredible? Imagine talking with Moses after that.

[32 : 49] Well, if you come back next week, you'll see how that works out. But this glory that God has is going to kill people and so he can't be close with him but he wants us to be close with him and he wants us to be in our lives, in the midst of our people but this glory kills.

So how how now? How do we get to be with God? Well, we've got someone who can reveal God's glory because he is God and he takes God's wrath, this dangerous glory of God and he takes it upon himself and he nullifies it.

so that we can experience God's glory safely. Romans 1.18 says the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Now, Moses is here a friend. Moses is a friend of God and God can still kill him. Imagine what he's going to do to his enemies.

God's wrath, not his irritation, not his frustration, his wrath, furious anger pouring out of him against people who sinned against him.

[34 : 25] By the way, that's us even though we're Christians. But his love is found in one place, one person, Christ.

Because only Jesus is able to take away God's angered sin and make us friends. A little bit later in Romans 5, Paul writes this, God demonstrates his own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him? For if while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life?

You know, so many people try to get to God without knowing Jesus and it's not going to work.

Maybe that's you. You're caught in this no man land between wanting to be close to God but being too scared because you know he's holy and you're a sinner.

Friends, there's only one remedy. It's the same one we all take as Christians. You've got to come to Christ. He's the one who can make friendship with God available to you. He's totally able to pay for our sins, totally able to empower you with the presence of God so that you're totally forgiven and able to live a life totally free from the sin that binds you.

[35 : 52] And then for the Christians, we need to realize we're in an amazing position, a way better position than the people of the Old Testament. Moses interceded and begged for God's presence and glory to be with his people.

He got God's presence. We get God's glory through Christ and the Holy Spirit. And so we can have more confidence than if Moses saw God and came back and told us about it.

The only thing is we don't see that power. It's not, we don't see the fire. We don't see the miracles necessarily happening in front of us. But it's there.

It's there if we hold on to it by faith. And so faith unlocks these realities, this presence of God God that takes away his wrath and gives us his glory. And so we've got to live as if these realities are true in our lives.

Because having God with you, having God's glory is the best thing that can happen to you. You don't need to worry about your relationship with God. You've got Christ and you've got him, you've got everything, you've got the Holy Spirit, you've got the very presence of the living God and the Father dwelling with you and he calls you his friend.

[37 : 05] So I'll end with this in John chapter 15. Greater love has no one than this to lay down his life for his friends. And Jesus says you are my friends if you do what I command.

I no longer call you servants because a servant doesn't know his master's business. Instead, I've called you friends for everything that I learned from my Father I've made known to you. And you didn't choose me, but I chose you.

And appointed you so that you can bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you. So friends, it turns out that the hand that kept Moses safe on that mountain is the same hand that keeps us safe.

And that hand is Christ. And isn't that a good place to be? Let's be thankful and pray and say thanks. Well, Lord Christ, we don't understand how close we are to danger because of our sin and we're sorry that we're not sorry enough for the way that we live.

And Lord, we just need your mercy and your spirit and your grace. As we've read, you're the one that takes the wrath of the Father away. Thank you, Lord, for doing that.

[38 : 23] Will you continue to do that in our lives? Help us to be thankful and to hold on to the truth and to experience your presence and your power in our lives as you see fit.

In Jesus' name, Amen.