

Being The Presence Of God

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- [0 : 0 0] If you've got your Bibles, Exodus 17. We're continuing the story of Israel on their journey through the wilderness. And the trials and the tests continue.
- I wonder if you've ever thought about the presence of God. How is God with me? And how do I know He's with me? Many of us want to feel God with us.
- Many Christians today talk about you can know that God is with you because you can experience Him in power, in miracles. And so there's a lot of confusion about how God works in our lives.
- How He is with us. Some Christians live as if the only way to get somewhere is if their car is, and get from A to B, they've got to have petrol in their car.
- That's obvious. That's not normal. But they're not too worried about how much petrol is in there. They'll just pray, and God must somehow make the petrol be in their car, and then they'll be able to go and do stuff.
- [1 : 0 5] So God sort of acts as some wizard that just puts stuff in the car, and then you'll get from A to B. You'll be fine. Some Christians close their eyes at their bank balance and pray that God will keep enough money in there.
- Just keep it there. I mean, maybe that's not some Christians. Maybe that's lots of us. Well, they pray for God's blessing on their life so they can enjoy their life.
- So God's blessing is for them. And they think only of their blessing. And that blessing is for them, and it's private, and it's personal.
- So when we think of how God works or God being with His people, we tend to think of it as God doing something privately, spiritual inside of us. Because in our Western mindset, religion and everything to do with God is private and personal, and then there's stuff that must happen out there, and we don't quite know how to connect the two.
- When stuff doesn't go their way, when we don't get the stuff we want, we tend to think God isn't with us. Well, today's passage teaches us about how God is present with His people, how God works in the world.
- [2 : 1 8] And we'll learn the main thing from today's passage, is that God's presence is mediated in the world through His people.
- So God gets stuff done in the world through His people. So God's presence is mediated or channeled through His people. You'll remember we actually prayed that in one of our prayers today, that we'll be a conduit when we prayed for those who are sick.
- We'll be a conduit, a channel for God's grace. Now, this may sort of strike us as a bit strange. After all, God is God. What does He need people for?
- So when He made the universe, He didn't use us, just made it. But remember, He put us in the universe, in the world.
- And what was God's command to Adam and Eve? Fill the earth and subdue it. So that God's purposes for the world are wrapped up by using humans to get stuff done.

[3 : 18] It's just how He works. If God wanted to make water fall from the sky, like He did in the journey with the, well, not water from the sky, but food from the sky, like He did with His people, can't He just continue doing that?

Here they face, in chapter 17, they face another problem with water. You just make it fall from the sky like He did with the food, in which case it would be rain. But, yeah, you can do that.

What about the Amalekites? Maybe, can't He just wipe them out like He did the Egyptians with some miraculous water? Why did He use Joshua and her and Aaron?

So God can do stuff by Himself. We've seen that in the plagues. We've seen that in how God saves His people. But He also uses His people to get stuff done on earth.

He also works through His people. So in chapter 17, in our first story today, God's people find themselves without water again. And instead of trusting God, which by now, you'd think that they'd be able to do, they pick a fight with Him.

[4 : 28] They demand. Instead of God testing them, they're now testing Him. And they show a lack of trust in His care, in His salvation, and His provision for them.

Their complaint or testing of Him centers around the question of His presence. We see that in verse 7. After God delivers them from their thirst and gives them water, Moses called that place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled, and because they tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us or not?

And they complained. We need water. Where are you? What are you doing? We thought you loved us. That age-old complaint. Did you bring us in the desert here to die? Why aren't you with us?

The presence of God there, of course, means to protect and to provide. Give us stuff. We need stuff. God's answer, in this case, is to use Moses, to show them that He is indeed among them.

God could have just made water gush from the rock by Himself. He could have just said to Moses, Listen, just stand there. Don't worry about it. Just watch what I'm going to do. But you notice what he does.

[5 : 43] Look what he says to Moses. Moses cries to the Lord. What am I supposed to do? So Moses doesn't even know what to do. He needs to go to ask God for help again. Verse 5, He tells Moses, Take his staff.

Take some elders. Hit the rock. These are all physical things. Things that his people can see. But, of course, behind those physical actions, stands Yahweh, the creator God of the universe, who's made every physical atom and every physical thing, and he will stand there and make water gush.

But he uses Moses, he uses the staff, and he uses the elders for some reason, so that all of Israel, as he walks past them, you can see them all working together. In the next story, it seems like Moses has finally learned his lesson.

There's a problem. They've faced many problems before. Every single time, people come to Moses and complain. Moses then goes to God and says, Lord, what do we need to do?

This is the first story where Moses doesn't do that. Do you notice that he just takes the initiative? So it could be that Moses has finally clicked on. You know what? God has put me in a position of authority and power.

[7 : 17] I need to just get stuff done, and I need to trust him. He's told me what to do before. I'm just going to go ahead and do it. He's the one. Moses is beginning to believe.

He's the one through whom God will work to save his people. And in the story, he's going to use some very surprising things. He's going to use his hands, and he's going to use his people.

If you notice in the story, when the Malachites pitch up and attack them out of the blue. So verse 9, Moses says to Joshua, that's the first time we're hearing about Joshua.

He's going to feature strongly in the stories to come. Maybe not in Exodus, but certainly as they go into the land in Numbers and Joshua. Moses says to Joshua, choose some of our men and go out to the Malachites.

Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands. He's still taking his staff, but he's taking the lead now. He doesn't go and ask God what to do. He now knows what to do. He knows that God is with him, and he knows that God is going to work through him to save his people.

[8 : 25] Then Joshua begins to fight the Malachites, verse 10. And then Aaron, verse 10, so Joshua fought the Malachites, as Moses ordered, and then notice again, Moses, Aaron, and Hur went to the top of the hill.

Now Hur, Joshua and Hur are new characters in the story. We haven't come across them before. Hur doesn't feature much after this. He's mentioned once again in the Bible, and that's that.

But there's people helping Moses get the job done. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning. Whenever he lowered his hands, maybe from tiredness, we're not quite sure what he's doing, the Malachites were winning.

So how's this going to work? What's going to happen? Well, Aaron and Hur make a plan. Verse 12, when Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone.

So here, a stone is helping the Israelites win. And put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, one on the other, so the hands remained steady till sunset.

[9 : 32] And in this way, that little word so, means in this way, Joshua overcame the Malachites, the Malachite army with the sword.

He's going to use his hands. Not quite sure how it worked. Did he lift them up in prayer? Many of the commentators say he lifted them up in prayer. We don't know. Maybe he lifted them up in a sign of victory.

Maybe he was giving signals. Right? Come boys, go! They could read the signals and then they were doing their thing. He's going to use people.

He's going to use his staff. There's going to be a rock. All physical things, and especially physical people, working and obeying God and getting stuff done to save God's people.

So here, more than any other story that we've had so far in the wilderness testings, God's people are showing active, obedient trust in God. For the first time, they're showing active, by getting stuff done, obedient, obeying God, and trust in God providing and saving his people.

[10 : 45] And the result is a total victory for Israel. But of course, God isn't far away. He's with them the whole time.

At the end of our story in chapter 17, God gives his approval to what Moses has done and acknowledges, and Moses himself acknowledges that it's God that gave them the victory.

God confirms it in verse 14 and verse 15. Moses builds an altar and calls it, the Lord is my banner. He said, for hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord.

The Lord will be at war against the Malachites from generation to generation. So God's answer to his people's question, is God amongst us or not? In this passage is, yes, I am always with you, like I've always been.

But I'm with you when you trust me, when you, my people, trust me and take action. My presence, in a sense, God is saying, is mediated or channeled or experienced when my people trust me, when they listen to me, when they obey me, and take action according to my word.

[12 : 00] I hope you can see that there in the text. Are you with me on that? You see the actions that Moses is taking and how he's getting stuff done. Now this may sound strange to us, that we are the instruments of God's work in the world.

We tend to think of God doing everything for ourselves and us as passive recipients of his salvation. Now this is true in terms of getting saved.

We can't do anything to receive salvation. God has to do the saving like he does with the Egyptians and like he does with providing quail. It's God who, God has to do it himself. We can't do that part of the work.

But, once he saved us, when it comes to God getting stuff done on earth, when it comes to God being with his people, God primarily works through his people to get stuff done on earth.

He uses his people and he uses the stuff that he's given them. In this case, staffs and stones and hands. God has always worked that way in the Bible and especially more so in the New Testament because the problem with the Old Testament people of God is they kept on failing him.

[13 : 12] They kept on mistrusting him. Here they started grumbling and moaning and testing him. This was a major thing in the history of Israel. It's picked up in Psalm 95. It's picked up in Psalm 78.

It's picked up in Corinthians with Paul. And he says, you don't grumble because when you grumble and you don't get what you demand from God, God starts getting very irritated. Don't test him because you're testing his patience.

And when his patience is tested, it normally goes very badly for you. Don't do that. So this is a massive lesson for Israel. They couldn't do it.

But the New Testament is different. God calls the people in the New Testament and he calls the people that don't fail in this regard. That trust him because he saved us through the cross, through the resurrection and by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit into our lives.

That makes all the difference. The New Testament people of God are a different breed to the Old Testament people of God. Same people, one marked by failure, the other one marked by success.

[14 : 19] But it's success of trust in God. We have the power of the resurrection and the presence of the Holy Spirit and it's not just for our own benefit but for the benefit of others. So the second point we've got to grasp is that the church, we, us, you, and me, the church is the primary means that God uses for others to experience his presence.

The church is the primary means that God uses for others to experience his presence. now, if you had Moses' hands and Moses' staff or Moses' people at your command, how emboldened would you be to tackle every problem, right every wrong, or take on every project for God?

You know, Moses picks up that staff every time. oh, I'm thirsty. Tap. Tap. That's better. I'm hungry.

Well, here's the thing, I don't have any petrol in my car. Tap. But, like, if you really had that power, wouldn't you, A, love to have that power, and B, wouldn't you love to use it?

So, if St. Mark's put on our brand new website, behold the staff of Moses, come and see it in power, and come and use it, okay, first of all, everyone would think, no.

[16 : 06] But if it was real, you'd be like, yes, let's go see what's happening there, because that staff is powerful. I guess in the Catholic Church in the old days and medieval times, they did that kind of thing, didn't they, with the bones of the saints, and the splinters from the cross of Christ, and the tears from the Virgin Mary or from the cross, they called them relics, and they thought they had power, and you'd come and do things, of course you'd have to pay, and then, so that's how they used to work in those days, come and see the power, they would have stuff that would be powerful.

So here's the thing about us. We outdo the power of the staff of Moses, of the hands of Moses, and of the whole people of God.

We are, we outdo them in power to magnitude, to a huge magnitude. We are way more powerful than that.

How do I say that? How can I say that? Turn with me to Ephesians chapter 2 quickly. After that, we'll head over to 1 Peter.

Ah, Ephesians chapter 1. How can we be more powerful than Moses? I don't know. Have you guys ever done that kind of miracle in your life? Water, quail, manna?

[17 : 38] Well, you have. Here's why. Paul is praying for the church. Ephesians chapter 1. I've shared this verse before, but it's worth sharing again.

Paul is praying for the church from verse 15. In verse 18, he says, I pray that the eyes of your heart, the church, may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

It's not our inheritance, that's his inheritance in us. God thinks we're glorious. I also want you to know this verse 19.

I want you to know his incomparably great power for us who have faith, for us who trust, for us who believe.

That power that you've got working in you is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and then seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, etc.

[18 : 53] Can you see why I say you've got more power than Moses? Moses didn't have that power. Peter talks about how the Old Testament saints wondered and looked forward to this great day of salvation, this amazing new power that will be released in the world.

They were waiting for it. and we've got that power. Are you with me? Just turn over to chapter 3 and have a look at verse 10 in Ephesians.

Chapter 3 in verse 10 Paul is talking about how God is working through the world and he's saved a new people and he's joined them to his old people.

In fact, they're now one people. For what intent? For what purpose? What are we to do as this new people of God that's got this resurrection power and the Holy Spirit?

Verse 10 His intent was that now through the church that's us that's you at St. Mark's that's Christians all over the globe that now through the church the manifold the multifaceted wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purposes which accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[20 : 23] Does that not raise us up to an incredibly high level? Read Ephesians 1 as well. God has blessed us in the spiritual in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing so we can actually do this thing.

I don't quite know how we do it but I just know that we are to do it. Actually I do know but that's not important for this sermon right now. But can you see you've got the resurrection power of Christ in you and the church is the thing that God says hey everyone check this check what I'm doing.

We're telling this is what it is we're telling the powers and principalities the things that used to rule the world the bad things we're telling them that their time has come they're no longer the ruler they're under new management because there's a new king in town it's Jesus and how well they're like well show us well look at my life look at us we're the shining ones we're the glorious ones check what we do and then you'll know the power of God does that make sense?

All right we are channels of God's life changing power isn't that cool? I think it's cool because it's stronger than the staff of Moses doesn't feel like that I know but we are who wouldn't want to be Moses with a staff?

Well we are like Moses just that our staff looks different sorry about this it's a bit cheesy but our staff the staff that we get to get stuff done by looks different to Moses I've got a car that's my staff I can do things for people I can take them I can lift them yours might look like a pot of soup you've got a stove a pot vegetables electricity yours might look like a pan of crunchies on a Friday night for the youth or Sunday evenings your staff might look like a microphone singing here church on a Sunday the stuff that God has given you to get stuff done looks different because God is multifaceted but still God has given us the power like Moses to get stuff done so whatever you've got use it for the glory of God so this combination of divine and human really it's a divine human partnership is picked up in our New Testament reading from from Peter so let's turn there and see what Peter has to say about this so 1 Peter chapter 4 alright so we are the presence of God so great you know what does that mean what am I supposed to do well start off by being nice yeah well be nice continue to be nice and when you're not nice don't be not nice ok this is my translation so 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 7 the end of all things is near that should get your attention ok therefore be alert and of sober minded so that you may pray alright so pray your staff looks like prayer but in your right mind ok but above all so pray but above all above that love each other deeply not love go deep go beyond what you do what you think you can do because love covers over a multitude of sins your love ok how do you know if God is present with us well if your life is characterized by loving others characterized by loving others deeply friends we get to share

[24 : 20] God's forgiveness with others think about that think how cool that is what a gift one of the biggest joys of your life is having your sins forgiven your guilt taken care of the things that you've done wrong and stupid and wish you hadn't done God is like you know what I don't even care about that I don't care it's gone it's done and you're like well you can do that with others I'm not saying you forgive their sins like God forgives their sins God will have to do it but he's going to use you to say you know what that part of the thing you did is not a big deal to me there's such power in forgiveness it frees both you and others from guilt and past mistakes but to many Christians instead of practicing love and forgiveness do the opposite that practice bitterness and revenge and judgmentalism yeah you shouldn't have done that and why did you do that and this person did that and wanna wanna wanna wanna I'm really frustrated oh this person looks like grumbling to me we must rather use the power that God has given us to show others by our words and our actions that we don't hold any grudge against him love is meant to cover sin not remind others of it you with me let's start there verse 9 we to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling how do you know

God is present with you when you freely share your home and your food with others and do so happily and with joy just because you like to do it our church our home our work should be places of welcome of so what is hospitality when do you feel hospitable when someone welcomes you in and makes you feel special imagine you go to a restaurant you've all been there you've been to a restaurant what I'd like the steak it's not good can I get a coke can I get a coke yeah well that's not welcoming hey hey how are you it's great to have you here what can I get you how can I help what can I do but be genuine about that welcoming to be hospitable is to be welcoming to embrace other people there's a warmth there there's a genuine happiness to include others and especially those who don't normally find welcome in the world that's the whole point about being hospitable remember Jesus in the gospel saying how if you hold a feast don't go and ask your friends go find the people that no one wants get them in so if you are like that person today and you don't fit in the world you're very welcome here

I trust and I hope you'll be made to feel welcome by others at St. Mark's you can also very practical steps of hospitality support the work we do through the Good Samaritan Project on a Sunday we make soup we actually do the hospitality thing you can make soup beforehand and freeze it you can come and cook it on a Sunday or you can come and spend time with people who are in desperate need of having wise loving Christians give them input and either just support and listen to them thriss with them a bit feel their pain but pray for them and offer some advice that they might be able to take you can also give goods to our helping hands cupboard we support people in need in this church not just on a Sunday but we've got helping hands it's a cupboard stocked with most of the time with food that we can give we hand out parcels of food that lasts sometimes up to two weeks now Barry tells me that he's done this before where he's put out an appeal for our helping hands cupboard and it was stocked wall to ceiling with coo beans look if you feel God telling you to go buy coo beans

I'm not going to get in the way but here's a better idea come and speak to me and say hey man what does the cupboard need right we don't just give the stuff out we sit and we talk to the people who need the help okay what's going on how did you get here what can we pray for oh man that sounds really bad have you thought of this and this and this and this and we follow up because we link it to the other means of grace other Christians that can give wise and godly and loving and kind counsel does that make sense or you can donate clothing to the U-turn bin bring your clothes give to those who because the U-turn helps those who have been through addiction and homelessness and helps them to find God and to start a new journey in life the U-turn bin is just in the in the hall next door but take note your acts of hospitality need to be done without grumbling because that's when you grumble you show that God isn't really with you you're not doing it from a place of grace you're not doing it out of his strength you're definitely not doing it for his glory you're just doing it because you have to or for whatever reason but don't do it don't be hospitable and grumble that's not going to work so be careful to be hospitable with genuine joy and acceptance of others

Peter goes on to say each of you should use whatever gift you've received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms if anyone speaks they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God if anyone serves they should do so with the strength that God provides but notice notice verse 10 each of you should serve each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards servants waiters if you will of God's grace in its various forms so that's exactly what we're saying God's grace is communicated to his people and then through his people we get to spread the grace of God it's the coolest thing ever we are a channel we are a waiter we are a steward of what God has given to us so that others can experience it what an amazing thing to be able to offer to others and it's in these various forms you get to offer a smorgasbord you're not like the waiter at the restaurant that can only give you a half dried eaten steak you know which restaurant let's not name restaurants but we've all been to a restaurant where the food hasn't been great we get the owner of this restaurant

[31 : 19] St. Mark's is the world's greatest chef he makes food that's amazing and he makes all kinds of food you get to offer love you get to offer grace you get to offer mercy you get to offer forgiveness you get to offer wisdom counsel you get to offer money that 50 bucks that's a means of grace that 50 bucks in your pocket is not doing anything yeah you don't want to give it to the guy you know what dude you can use it better than me here's 50 bucks that's his salvation for the day you've given him food clothes food shelter lifts kindness encouragement support you've got a wide variety of stuff you can do for God and his kingdom and because it's God's grace it's there's a wholeness there's a wholesomeness there's a healingness to what you offer it's so attractive to others it's so attractive when people see yo this guy is just loving me and he's just kind and he knows what he's talking about well she can really help me in this and she said some really nice things and I can see it's genuine they just love it who wouldn't you did that's why you came to God so attractive to others especially those who look for love and connection and healing if anyone speaks they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God your words are the words of God well that's that's powerful if they are the words of God if they're nice words if they're horrible judgy words and rude words and nasty words then you're not speaking the words of God and they have no real power they do have power to hurt unfortunately but they don't have power to heal rather use those words if anyone serves they should do so with the strength

God provides God gives us the strength to do these things we don't think we have the power or the ability or the energy but we do we do like Moses was given that power in fact in a sense we've got more power because of the resurrection and we've got the promise of the Holy Spirit why would you not want to be part of that and channel God's love to others the best way you can get God to be praised and for Jesus to be honored is not by you doing the praising but by you by us being an active member of his people by making use of the stuff that he's given us by making use of yourself to love and to serve others and Peter ends that section by saying if you do this then in all things God will be praised through Jesus Christ to him be the glory and the power forever and ever Amen Let's pray Heavenly Father we are your unworthy servants we feel unworthy we feel unable we feel useless we feel our sin we feel our frailty we feel our uselessness but we are still your servants and you've given us your power you've given us your Holy Spirit you've given us the victory in Christ you've given us all things we need to live in this world for your glory but you've also given us the ability to spread that glory your love and your mercy to others

Lord help us to remember that we are channels servants of you help us to be effective help us to hold on to that truth and to do all things through Christ who gives us strength Amen for ourān that we can understand what did the way are to bring to us dell and of Money the way to give us an example of the way to how we have this is a ant demonstration