

God's Presence Gives Us Rest

Exodus 33:12-23 (NIV)

¹² 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 favor with me.' ¹³ If you are 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." ¹⁴ The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶ How will anyone know that you are 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?" ¹⁷ And 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." ¹⁸ Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." ²¹ Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²² When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³ Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Leading up to our Bible reading today from Exodus, the Israelites, descendants of Abraham, have seen a powerful God working for them. God called Moses from the wilderness in Midian to go to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery and to the land the LORD had promised to his people. He also promised to be with Moses in this whole endeavor. 10 miraculous plagues later that ravaged Egypt and the Egyptians while sparing the Israelites, God brought them to the Red Sea. With the Egyptian army bearing down on them, the LORD blocked them from the Israelites all night long while he parted the sea, and the Israelites crossed it on dry ground. The LORD provided water several times for the camp of some 2 million people - even one time from a rock. He gave them food every day in the form of manna. He also gave them meat to eat with quail. They were fed. They were cared for. They were protected. They were going to the Promised Land.

In that afterglow of providence and care, God gave them his commandments from Mount Sinai. There, the whole assembly of Israelites declared that they would love God above all others and serve him only. Within less than 40 days of that, they had made a golden calf and worshiped it as the God who did all those great things for them. But it's never just one sin. The worship of the golden calf also led to a drunken party, filled with all sorts of sinful indulgences to the point where the people were described as being out of control and Moses and the Levites strapped on swords and put people to death for their sins.

In response, God promises to punish those who sin against him, but he also tells Moses that he will not go with him or the Israelites because they are a stubbornly sinful people that he might destroy if he does go with them. And, really, why should God go with them? After all the good things that God had done for them, and then they decide to throw it all away so that they could hardcore indulge in sin. God didn't want to destroy them with judgment. So, he decides to withdraw his presence from them, much like we separate and grow distant from a friend who has betrayed us or not been there for us.

Do you feel like God has withdrawn his presence from you? Things haven't gone well. Life has had more setbacks than progress, more steps backwards than steps forward. It feels like God has stopped blessing you, that he is no longer with you.

So, you look for a cause. Maybe I sinned so greatly that God is punishing me by withdrawing his presence from me. Maybe the words from the Gospel reading from last week are still ringing in your ears, that anyone who loves their father or mother or son or daughter more than God is not worthy of God, that you have a really hard time with honestly loving God above your family. Maybe you recognize other idols in your life, the things that you value and love more than God, even though God has richly and daily provided you with so many good things, most importantly your salvation. Maybe I have been self-justifying why my sinful actions are okay, that my sins aren't that bad. But then I see this holy God who is perfect in every way, and I know that I cannot stand before him and live. All my righteous acts are like filthy rags. I don't deserve to have God be with me because I am a poor miserable sinner.

Yet, in spite of God saying that he would withdraw his presence from Moses and the Israelites, what does Moses do? He is so bold as to intercede for the Israelites. He goes to God to ask who will go with him to lead these people into the Promised land.

How can Moses be so bold? Is it because he didn't participate in the idol worship? Because he was so zealous for the LORD in breaking the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, grinding the golden calf into a powder and making the Israelites drink it, strapping on a sword and bringing judgment the Israelites indulging in their wild, sinful revelry? No, in fact, even though Moses had

not committed the sin of idolatry here, he had committed many other sins – including murder. He doesn't deserve to stand before God and ask him anything. So, why is he so bold in his request to God?

Moses is bold not because of who he is but because of who the LORD is. "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 favor with me.' If you are 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." (verses 12-13) You told me to lead them. You promised to be with me. You promised that you would lead this nation to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You picked them, in spite of their sins. Even though I am a horrible sinner, you know me by name. You chose me. You found favor with me. Moses recalls these things because he already knows that the LORD is good and has experienced his goodness. The LORD has had mercy and compassion on Moses by the LORD's own choice, by his own will. That's why he is bold in his request to God.

The LORD immediately answers Moses' bold request. He replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (verse 14) There was no bargaining, no cajoling, no pleading, no acts of restitution. The LORD held to his goodness and had compassion and mercy on Moses and the Israelites, even knowing what they just did. Their sins were forgiven by God's choice. He was not holding their sins against them.

Moses then boldly pressed God again saying to him that if the LORD's presence doesn't go with him and the Israelites, then there is no point in going, that they will not be victorious or successful without him, that they are nothing without him. And the LORD reassured Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." (verse 17) He is true to his goodness, to his name. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (verse 19) To prove this, the LORD had his presence pass in front of Moses, while protecting Moses with his hand while he was in a cleft in the rock since no sinner this side of heaven can see the face of the LORD and live.

When we feel like God is distant from us, holding us at an arm's length, and maybe we think it is because of some great sin we have committed, we can still be as bold as Moses. Bold, not because we are so righteous or so good, but because of who the LORD is, what he has promised because of his goodness. He has promised to be with us always to the very end of the age. He has handed his Word down to us to assure us that he will never leave us nor forsake us, never turning his back on us. He has said definitively nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. The LORD allows us to boldly hold him to these promises, that he would stay with us, that his presence would go with us, that he would fight for us and give us rest.

God going with us, his presence, gives us rest because it reminds us that God, like he did for Moses, has already had mercy and compassion on us. Our sins are already forgiven in Christ. God has defeated our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. Whenever these enemies crop back up in our lives, the LORD fights for us. The battles belong to him, and when they belong to him, we win. God's got this. So, with his presence based on his promise and his goodness, we know that he goes with us and will bring us to an ever better Promised Land. He will get us to heaven. He will do all these things because of who he is. His presence gives us rest.

The LORD has had mercy and compassion on us, just like he did for Moses and the Israelites. He will bring us to the Promised Land of heaven. We will get to see God face to face because in his goodness our sins are forgiven. We continue our journey in life, resting in his presence that goes with us. Amen.