

God is Desired
Exodus 33-34

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Can you remember a time when you had multiple-choice in front of you and you couldn't decide what to do? Which college to go to? Which job offer to accept? What car to buy? Years ago when I was in college our city got hit with a massive storm in December that cut out the power to our school. Good news and bad news. The good news is the school decided to cancel finals that year. Can you imagine! Every student's dream come true. The bad news is that it was cold and we didn't have any place to go. We had some friends who had a generator, and about 25 of us flocked to their home. We were sitting around the living room talking about bad first date experiences. I shared one that I thought was going to take the cake; but after I shared one, of my buddies named Brian spoke up. Self admittedly, Brian didn't have the most luck with girls. He has a lot of redeeming qualities, but smoothness wasn't one of them. He was too shy to ask this girl that he liked out on a date, so he got his minister to fix them up. So they go to a movie (probably not the best idea) and he gets so nervous that he had to get up and go to the bathroom as soon as the show started. When he got back and sat down, he realized, "Oh no, my zipper is down." He said that he knew he had two options. Option A, he could stand up, turn to the side, take off his coat, and then zip it up. But he thought that option would make him look too fidgety. So he went with option B, which was to create a diversion by pointing to the right, and then slouching down in his seat to pull up his zipper. Well, in Brian's own words, which he said with shame, "I failed to take into account that the girl sitting in front of us had really, really long hair." In trying to be discreet, he ended up with the movie stopped, the lights on, everyone in the theater laughing at the situation and the manager coming out with scissors. Now that's a bad first date!

What do you do in a situation like that? Sometimes it's hard to know what the next best step to take is. That's the place where we find the Israelites in our story today. We are in Exodus 33, and if you remember, in the past chapter, the people fell into a very serious sin. They made an image of a golden calf, held a festival in the name of God, and they partied in a very inappropriate way...they gorged themselves on food, got drunk, and they engaged in sexually inappropriate behavior ...all in the name of worshiping God. The Lord was angry. At first he was going to punish them with death, but Moses interceded for the people and God relented. God said, okay, I won't kill you, but neither am I going to move forward in a relationship with you. You can live, but our relationship has come to an end. **33:1-3 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' 2 I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 3 Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."** Did you see that? God says I'm going to give you the land I promised, I'm going to set you up as your own nation, **but I will not go with you**, I'm going to send an angel to take care of it.

For a modern analogy think of a rich man who falls in love with a young woman from the slums whose family is entirely impoverished. They decide to marry, have a beautiful wedding, and then, right after the honeymoon, that young woman decides to be unfaithful to her husband and is intimate with someone else. When the husband finds out he's angry and heartbroken. He plans to

wash his hands of the entire marriage, tells her he is going to draw up paperwork for an annulment, and she can go back to the slums where she came from. She begs for mercy. She falls down at his feet and pleads for him to forgive her. And because he loves her, his heart is moved with compassion...he says okay, you don't have to go back to the slums. You can have my house. You can have my car; you can have my credit card. You can have all the benefits of being married to me, but you can't have me.

That is, in effect, what God is saying here: He tells the Israelites, I'm not going to destroy you, I'm not going to send you back to Egypt. You can go to the promised land, but I'm not going with you. What does it mean for God's presence to not be with them? In the Bible, God's presence is talked about in three different ways:

God's omnipresence (God is everywhere)

God's indwelling presence (God lives inside of those who have placed their faith in Jesus)

God's manifest presence (When God shows up in a specific way and it is clear and evident to everyone that he is near). That's what God has been doing for the Israelites since he set them free from Egypt, and that's what he says he's going to rescind.

4 When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. 5 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 I will decide what to do with you.'"⁶ **So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.** This is one of the first things the Israelites actually get right. When they hear God won't go with them, they are distraught and dismayed. They began to mourn and took off fine clothing and jewelry. That would be like people today going to a funeral and wearing all black, as a sign of grief, an outward expression of sorrow and loss.

And then just as Moses did in Exodus 32, he steps up and intercedes for the Israelites, and asks God to change his mind. **15 Moses said to The Lord, "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?"** Going back to the analogy of the impoverished woman who married the rich man, and the rich man says I won't send you back to the slums, but I also won't stay with you. You can have my house, my car, all my things, but you can't have me. Then imagine that woman looking at her husband and says, "No, that's not what I want. I don't want your things; I want you. I don't want riches; I want a relationship." That's what Moses and the Israelites are saying here. How do you think God responded to their earnest and heartfelt desire to be near to him? **17 And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked."** My presence will go with you! I will dwell among you. I will be your God; you will be my people.

And Moses, seeing that he has found favor with God, decides to make another request, to ask for even more. Look at what he does next: **18 Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."** This is Moses' way of saying to God, "I heard your voice in the burning bush. I saw your power through the miracles in Egypt. I watched you part the Red Sea. I've eaten the bread you sent from heaven and drank water you sent from the rock, but now I want even more! I want to see your glory. What does that mean? I think that's Moses' way of saying, "I don't just want to know

about you, I want to know you. I don't just want to see your power; I want to see you." It's a sincere and earnest plea. And how does God respond? **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."**

So Moses gets to behold the glory of God! Moses spends time in God's presence on the mountain. And being in God's presence changed him. It actually altered his physical appearance. **34:29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai...he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him...33 When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. 34 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, 35 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.** Being in God's presence affected Moses so much that others could see it on him. His face glowed. Moses actually had to wear a veil so that others could approach him and not be distracted. Being in God's presence changed Moses. And I think there is a powerful lesson there: *When a person sincerely spends sustained in the presence of God, they never leave the same.*

This is one of my favorite passages in the entire book of Exodus. There are two elements I want to talk about at greater length. **Desiring God's Presence** and **Reflecting God's Glory**. Let's look at each one of them. First, **Desiring God's presence**. That's what the Israelites are doing. When they hear that God won't be with them, they go into mourning. Moses says if you won't be with us, don't send us to the promised land. We'd rather stay here and starve and die in the wilderness with you, than have all the riches and luxuries of life in the promised land without you. Is that our heart? Do we find ourselves more interested in seeking the provision of God or the presence of God? The blessings God gives, or God himself?

When I think about pursuing something I can't help but think of this man, **Eliud Kipchoge**, who set out to do something no one in the world had ever done before - run a full marathon, 26.219 miles, in under two hours. He was already the fastest man on the planet, he already had the world record, but he wanted to break the infamous two-hour mark. So he set a date on the calendar, October 12th of this year, and planned out every detail to precision. His team chose a city close to sea level for more oxygen. They chose a path with tall trees, to cut down on wind. They chose a time of year when it would be roughly 50 degrees, not too hot, not too cold, but just right. They had a laser which told him the pace he needed to stay on, so he never wasted an ounce of effort with unnecessary acceleration, and there was a rotating team of three people that ran in a triangle all around him to keep him from the impact of wind from any direction. That's a lot of work, from a lot of people, **but as you can see here**, the end result was that it paid off. This man crossed the finish line in 1:59:40, with 20 seconds to spare. His family and his entire team

celebrated with him. Check out **the celebration in his home country of Kenya** when he crossed the line.

So much effort put toward that race, striving toward that goal. And such a celebration when he met that goal. Let me ask you: How much effort are you putting into knowing God? How committed are you to knowing him? How seriously and intentionally are you pursuing him? I think it's easy to casually say the words, "I want to be a godly woman" or "I want to be a godly man," but then in the course of a given day, week or month, do very little besides show up to church in order to actually become a godly woman or godly man? How much do you want God's presence? Like Eliud, are you willing to put a plan in place, to bring people alongside you, to sacrifice other priorities in your life to realize your heart's desires?

These people wanted to be in God's presence! Listen to this incredible passage from Psalm 84:1-4 **How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, Lord Almighty, my King and my God.** (He is looking at the temple, the dwelling place of God, and saying, "Look the birds have nested there. They have made their home near you. They raise their children near you. And I want to be like them. Whatever it takes to be close to God.) **Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.**
Psalm 84:4

What would it look like to have our desires purified? I remember years ago being at a conference where this man, **Simon Mbevi**, was speaking. Simon is a man of great faith. He serves as a pastor in Kenya where he planted dozens of churches. Thousands and thousands of people have been impacted by his ministry. He's been invited into Muslim schools to mentor boys, invited into prisons to serve inmates. He had so much influence over the president of the country that on March 4, 2013, he officially declared Kenya a Christian nation, devoted to the glory of God. Typically, when a man like this is introduced that emcee will go through a long list of their accomplishments: their degrees, their impact, here's all they have done, here's why they are so important, here's why you need to listen to him. But when he was introduced at the conference I was at, the person just said a single sentence to introduce him. He said, "Simon Mbevi is a man who only wants God." I sat there and thought two things: First, that's the most compelling introduction I've ever heard. Second, one day, I hope that's able to be said of me. Are we desperate for God? Do we have the heart of Moses to say, "**Show me your glory.**"

There is something we want to do as a church family to help us carry this out. I am so, so excited about this. In order to help us kick off the new year, we are going to take two entire weeks and do a 24/7 prayer experience together. When I say a two-week, 24/7 prayer experience, here's what I mean. We are going to have a night of prayer and worship on Jan 10th, which is a Friday, that's going to be from 6:30 - 9:30 that our entire church is invited to. And then we are going to have one-hour prayer slots for the next two weeks, all throughout the day and night, for people to sign up for and say, "I will commit to praying during that time." We will have a prayer room that people come in to use from 7:00 in the morning until 11:00 at night. For security and safety purposes we are going to have those who sign up for prayer late at night or in the early morning hours to set their alarm, wake up, and pray at home. As a church community, we are going to set

our hearts on God's presence, we are going to prioritize prayer and intimacy with him. We are going to cry out to God: "Show us your glory!" Some of you have been praying for a long time and this can just be a normal part of your devotions during those two weeks. Some of you are thinking, I don't know how to pray, I'm not sure what to do for an hour alone with God? This is a great time to start. January is the start of a new year and a new decade...what a way to get us kicked off--seeking the presence of God. When you sign up, we'll give you passages of the Bible to read, needs in the community as well as ministry opportunities at the church that you can pray about, and even some suggestions on how to pray. You won't be in this alone. To wrap up the two weeks we'll have another prayer and worship night that everyone is welcomed to come to. This is going to be an opportunity for us as a church, as well as for you as an individual, for you and your family, to say, "We are desperate for God's presence!"

I want you to think about two things: How delighted will the heart of God be to see his people so committed to his presence? 24/7 for two straight weeks, to start the new year and the new decade putting him first and pursuing him with all our hearts. Second, what sort of impact do you think we will see both in our lives and in the heavenly realms in response to those prayers? I believe that heaven will be different and so will we, from spending that time with the Lord.

And that leads to the second point of emphasis: **Reflecting God's glory**. When we desire God's presence and experience his presence, we will reflect his glory. Do you remember what happened to Moses? Being in God's presence changed him. And the same will be true for us. I don't mean this in a cheesy or corny way.

For those of you who watched TV in the '90s, you might remember what happened when **Ross from FRIENDS** went in to get a spray tan and ended up looking like this. Or when **Kramer from Seinfeld** fell asleep on a rooftop with butter on his body and ended up looking like this. That is clearly not what we are going for! Think more about what happens when we look up at the sky at night and see the moon. People talk about it being a crescent moon, a quarter moon, a new moon, a full moon. We know this, but the moon is always the exact same size and shape, but we only get to see the amount that has light cast upon it. The more light that hits the moon, the brighter our night sky is. How true is that for our lives. We don't want just a little bit of the glory of God to rub off on us. We want to live in his presence. We want to absorb his goodness and grace. We want his light to shine upon every aspect of our lives so that we can show the world who he is.

Moses asked God to be with them and specifically said, "**What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?**" Exodus 33:16. People are supposed to be able to look at our lives and know that God is among us. I remember when I was in middle school and high school, the first day of class, everyone had to go around and introduce themselves. And to help the teacher and your classmates remember who you are, you had to say your name, and then an adjective that describes you that also begins with the first letter of your name. So there was terrific Timmy, smart Samantha, charming Charlie, I always introduced myself as dangerous Dan. We have so many words that could be used to describe us, that set us apart and help people remember who we are, but what if the defining aspect and quality of our life was that we belong to God, that his presence is among us and his glory shines upon us?! Imagine the difference...the primary thing that defines us isn't our race (black, white, Latino,

Asian), not my age (student, millennial, empty nester, retired), my job (teacher, carpenter, police officer), relational status (single, married, mother of three)...not that those things are washed away or invalidated. But what if they weren't the lead, weren't the first thing we said about ourselves or that others took note of...because the resounding quality of our lives was that we reflect God's glory?

Moses had to put on a veil to keep people from looking at him. Do you know what it says in 2 Corinthians 3:13 **We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face....3:18 We all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.**

That's what we want to happen! We want to be desperate for his presence. We want to behold his glory and be transformed from the inside out, and then we want to reflect his glory to the world, so they can see how wonderful, kind and loving God is.

Jesus said in John 8:12, **"I am the light of the world."**
He also said in Matthew 5:14 **"You are the light of the world."**

How is that possible? Is Jesus mixing his metaphors here? No. Jesus is the light, but as he lives in us, as we dwell in his presence, he shines through us! It's his presence that makes all the difference.

God is able to dwell among us perfectly because of Jesus. We have all sinned. We pushed God away. Through Jesus, God came near, he paid the penalty for our sins. He restored us and made us new.

Invitation and Communion.