

May 27, 2017

## Exodus 33-34

### God's Exodus People: The Gift of God's Presence

*Jonathan M. Romig*  
[CornerstoneWestford.com](http://CornerstoneWestford.com)

If you could have anything you wanted, would you take it? Imagine for a moment that God is offering to give you whatever you want. You can have the husband or wife or kids you always wanted, and you can have the house, business, and career too. This blessing doesn't stop with you, but everyone else in here gets it too. We as a church can all have whatever we want. We are guaranteed a successful children's ministry, a beautiful worship band, booming attendance (we'll be well over a thousand in no time), and everyone around us will love us. Wouldn't you want God to give you this?

But there's a catch. Each and every one of us and this church, can have exactly what we want, but without God. In this scenario, God is offering us two options—everything (but him), or him alone. Which one would you take? Would you take everything from God or nothing but God?

Today and next week we're going back to the book of **Exodus** to finish up our sermon series, God's Exodus People. Last time we were in the book of Exodus, the Israelites had just cheated on their brand new covenant relationship with God by creating and worshipping a golden calf. Now God is angry with them, and is about to deliver the worst news in the world. They can have whatever they want, but without God himself, without **God's special presence** with them as a people.

### **Without God's presence, we're lost. (33:1-6)**

Do you remember what the opening chapters of Exodus are about? God introduced himself to Moses at the burning bush as "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be" (Ex 4:14). Then God introduced himself to the Israelites and all the nations, starting with Egypt, through the plagues and the crossing at the Red Sea (Ex 9:16). At Sinai, God explains how God can be with the Israelites through a **covenant relationship**. If they obey God's law (i.e., the Ten Commandments), he will be with them, but if they disobey, he won't.

The whole purpose of Exodus is a **rescue story**. God is rescuing his people so God can be with and among them. This is what God's **presence** is. God plans to dwell among his people through a tabernacle, a special tent where he will be among the nation of Israel. He will be their God and they will be his people (Ex 6:7). This is why Exodus 33-34, today's chapters, are placed right between two very important sections. In Exodus **25-31**, God gives instructions for the tabernacle, and in Exodus **35-40**, the people build the tabernacle. The units are very similar, and our text is sandwiched between them. *It's arranged this way to tell us that everything hinges on God's presence dwelling with his people at the tabernacle, but now that's at risk.*

God is still willing to give the Israelites the promised land, and even send "**an angel**" with them (33:2, c.f., 23:23), but he isn't willing to go with them. Why not? They're a sinful "stiff-necked people" and he may destroy them if he goes with them (v. 3). But without God's presence, the Israelites are lost. This is why they mourn and take off all their jewelry. God gave silver and gold to the Israelites as the left Egypt (3:22), and they in turn used that wedding gift to make a golden calf (32:2-4). When a couple breaks up, the girl takes the ring off. Israel is taking her wedding ring off. *They broke their relationship with God through disobedience, and the consequence is not experiencing God's presence.*

**Apply:** Like Israel, our church is at the start of a great journey. We're, Lord willing, going autonomous soon. That means we'll be our own independent church, not under the authority of our parent Immanuel any more. All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

I want to ask us one question. Which is more important to us, working for God or God himself? Are we more excited about the wedding or the marriage? Do we want a successful ministry with the best children's program, worship ministry, preaching and teaching and small groups? Or do we want Jesus? My prayer is that each of us would want Jesus first. *Without God's presence, we're lost.*

## **God's presence separates religion from relationship. (33:7-11)**

The next little section, verses 7-11, tell us the story of Moses going outside the camp to a little tent called "the tent of meeting" (v. 7) to talk with God. But after the harsh consequence of the previous section, this vignette seems out of place, like an awkward insertion or interjection in the story. *However, these verses are placed here on purpose to show us what it looks like for God's presence to not be among his people.*

Originally, with the tabernacle, God promised that his presence would not be outside the camp, but inside the camp in the midst of the people. **Exodus 25:8** says, "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. (NIV®) Now God is saying he can't dwell with them because of their sin. *As we look closer, we see God's presence is what separates religion from relationship.*

### **Religion happens from afar. (v. 10)**

Moses goes out to meet with God but the people stay behind. They don't leave the entrances of their tents (v. 8). They are experiencing the consequences of sinning against God, separation from God's presence. *Because of their sin with the golden calf, the people are afraid to draw near to God. Worshipping the idea of God without the presence of God is empty religion.*

Contrast the people's actions with the actions of **Joshua**, Moses's assistant. The end of verse 11 says that even after Moses left the tent, "his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent." See, he wanted to be close to God's presence, not far away. He knew that to truly know God, we have to be close to him.

**Apply:** This is why we begin our church services with a **prayer of invocation**. We want God's presence here or we're just going through the motions. This is why as I prepare my **sermon**, I pray over and over again asking for the Holy Spirit to speak to me and through me. This is why Immanuel's **Elders** and our Cornerstone leadership team begin every meeting with prayer. Honestly, I just want to jump right into business, but what's business without God's presence? Emptiness. *Religion happens from afar.*

### **Relationship get's up-close and personal. (v. 11)**

Compare Israel's experience of God with Moses', which says, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face." Tim Chester, in *Exodus for You*, believes what we have here is Moses speaking to the **pre-incarnate Son of God** in the tent (pg. 239). So when God says later in this same chapter "no one may see me and live" and then passes by Moses in the rock cleft, perhaps that's the Father. *Either way, what matters is Moses get's up-close and personal with God.*

Verse 11 adds that God spoke to Moses "as one speaks to a friend." This word for friend is often translated as "**neighbor**" which is someone who lives close by. They're like two neighbors who are also friends chatting on the deck sipping iced-tea in the summer, maybe they're going to have a **BBQ** and just went for a swim in the backyard pool.

**Apply:** Do you want to know God like that or to be the neighbor that watches through their **window curtains** across the street in jealousy? To know God's presence, you need to get up-close and personal with him. He needs to be able to see your blemishes, the food caught between your teeth, your sins. When you come to **church**, are you going through the motions and your heart is far off, or are you getting up-close and

personal with God? Are you bringing your heart to love God and your mind to think on him? *Religion stays away from God, but relationship gets up close and personal with God's presence.* The Israelites yesterday and we today can experience God's presence for a reason.

## **We can experience God's presence because of a selfless mediator (33:12-22)**

A mediator is "Someone who brings two enemies together and makes it possible for them to be friends again." I want to talk about two mediators, the first of which stands between God and Israel.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Moses**

Moses stands up to God by **reminding** him that the Israelites are God's people. He says, "Remember that this nation is your people." The word remember actually means "look" or "see." Moses is saying, "Look at your people God. Look at them!" It's always easier to be angry at someone when you can't see them. When we see those we're upset with, it helps us remember our love for them.

Moses seems to win the day with this argument. God says, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (v. 14) But actually, God is using "**you**" **singular** here, not "ya'll" plural. He's saying, "I'll go with you, but only you Moses." Moses has the wonderful opportunity to get everything and God, to receive all of God's **presents**, and his presence too, but at the cost of millions of souls. If you could have a guarantee from God that you and all your family members would go to heaven, but two million people had to go to hell, would you take that deal? I mean, they'll probably go anyways, right? Moses wouldn't take that deal.

Moses, at great personal costs, risks it all for his people. Notice the plural "us" in verse 15. "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." Then he adds, "What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (v. 16) Tony Merida pointed out to me that what makes the Israelites **special** is not their money, they're poor exiled slaves, or their army, they don't have one, or even their goodness, they're idol worshipers—only God's presence with them makes them special.

**Illustration:** I want to show you a picture of a man in the snow with an umbrella. He's well dressed, but there doesn't seem to be much to him. But you can tell that he's with someone. If you saw this picture alone, you wouldn't think much of him, would you. But how about this picture? This man is holding the umbrella for Jackie Kennedy the night before the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. You can see him in the background. The man holding the umbrella is Jackie's Secret Service bodyguard, and he happens to be my uncle. His name was Jeff. Now maybe you're thinking, "Jeff was a special guy." He seems a little bit more significant than just a man in the snow. *The only reason Israel is special is because God is with them. The only reason we are special today is because Jesus is with us.*

When Moses stands up to God, selflessly asking for God's special presence at the cost of his own blessing, he becomes a **model** for a future figure.

### **2. Jesus**

Moses was Israel's mediator back then, but Jesus Christ is our mediator today. He is the go-between us and God. **1 Timothy 2:5** says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus," (NIV®) Without God's presence, we're lost. But because we're **sinners**, we're also lost with his presence. God can't go up with Israel because he'll **destroy** them because he is holy and they are not. We have the same problem. We're all born in our own sins, which makes us enemies of God (Rom 3:10). Moses,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Galatians For You* by Timothy Keller. The Good Book Company (TGB). 2013. Page 190.

even in all his goodness, needed a **rock to shield** him from God's presence when God walks by at the end of chapter 33. We need a rock to shield us. We have that rock in Christ (1 Cor 10:4).

Like Moses, Jesus is a selfless mediator. He laid down his life on the cross to save us. He took on the brunt of God's glory so we can live. He was **destroyed** so that we don't have to be. He took on our destruction, and was removed from his Father's special presence, abandoned and alone, so that you and I can know the Father's forgiveness forever and ever. Do you know Christ as your mediator? Is he the one who shields you from God? Is he the one who not only saves you, but invites you into a special relationship with God?

**Apply:** Just like God's presence with Israel made them special, Jesus's presence with us makes us special. Without Jesus, we're not really a church, but a social club. Without Jesus, I'm no better than a motivational speaker, and not a very good one at that. Without Jesus, we're just singing to ourselves. As a church, and as believers, we must always stick with Christ because without him, we have nothing but empty religion. *We can experience God's presence because of a selfless mediator, Jesus Christ.* There's another reason...

## **We can experience God's presence because of His grace. (34:1-28)**

In response to all of Israel's sins, to their committing idolatry with a golden calf statue, to their breaking their marriage covenant with God, God does the unthinkable. He offers them grace. **Grace** means "undeserved, overflowing generosity."<sup>2</sup>

When God initially made the covenant with Israel, he wrote the **Ten Commandments down** on two stone tablets. When Israel worshipped the golden calf, they broke the **first two** commandments, no other gods and no idols. This is why Moses throws down the tablets, and they smash, because Israel has broken the covenant (Ex 32:19). But at the beginning of chapter 34, God asks Moses to bring two **new stone tablets** up the mountain so he can make them again. *Even though Israel is unfaithful God is going to be faithful.*

**Illustration:** Israel gave God divorce papers, but God is tearing them up. Israel broke all her wedding vows, but God is whispering his once more. Israel threw her wedding ring into the ocean, but God is molding her a new one. God is the faithful husband who gives his bride underserved, overflowing generosity. Grace.

Israel and God are **starting afresh**. What do you do when you hurt someone but try to start again? You say, "Can we start again? Hi, my name is Jonathan." This is what God does. He introduces himself to his people. I recently heard one Pastor describe Exodus 34:6-7 as the most quoted verses in the Bible by the Bible.

**Exodus 34:6-7** And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." (NIV®)

These verses tell us the character of the God of Israel, and our God today.

## **Our God, Yahweh, is immeasurably gracious. (34:1-7)**

Notice how "the LORD, the LORD" is in capital letters. This is the English Bible's way of telling us the Old Testament is using God's special covenant name, "Yahweh, Yahweh." This is a name that's so special to the Israelite nation that people wouldn't utter his name. We don't even know if we're pronouncing it correctly

---

<sup>2</sup> *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester. The Good Book Company (TGB). 2016. Page 268.

today, and many modern Jews still don't say "Yahweh" out of reverence. But God tells his name to his people as a promise of his commitment to them. Then he goes further, saying who he is:

- **I am compassionate and gracious.** Remember how Moses asked God to look on his people? When Yahweh looks on our needs, he has compassion on us. (Matt 9:36).
- **I am slow to anger.** He's patient when he has every right to get mad.
- **I am abounding in love and faithfulness.** The word for love here is *hesed* (חֶסֶד), which means "loyal love." It's a special covenant love. Yahweh gives undeserved loyalty to his people despite our sins.
- **I love thousands and forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin.** Yahweh flows over with love for his people and is quick to forgive our sinful hearts and wrongdoing.
- **I do not leave the guilty unpunished.** Yahweh brings true justice. He promises to right every wrong.

But then there's this **odd statement**, "he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth **generation**." That makes me really uncomfortable, but it shouldn't, because God is intentionally contrasting grace with punishment here. Back in **Exodus 20:4-6**, when Yahweh gave Israel the Ten Commandments, he says he will punish children for the sin of their parents to the third and fourth generations "of those who hate me" but adds, "but showing love to a **thousand generations** of those who love me and keep my commandments."

If Moses had excel, and could **graph** God's love versus God's punishment, the graph would look a little like this (**Punishment** = 4 Generations vs. **Grace** = 1000 Generations). God will show his loyal love to a thousand generations of those who love him. *Our God, Yahweh, is immeasurably gracious.*

Don't you want to know this God? Don't you want this God's presence in your life. Not only does Moses model the mediator Christ Jesus, but he shows us how to invite God's presence into our lives.

## **We seek God's presence through worship, prayer, fasting, and Scripture. (34:8-35)**

- Worship.** Following God's self introduction, in 34:8 we see Moses immediately fall on the ground in worship. If you want to experience God's presence, try worshipping him. We seek God together, in **community**, as we worship him. The first way way can be both alone or with others.
- Prayer.** After worship, Moses cries out to God in prayer in verse 9. If you want to know God, if you want to experience his presence, pray. Pray to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to come into your life and into our church and transform us.
- Fasting.** We don't talk about fasting much, but in verse 28. Moses is with Yahweh "forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water." He is so nourished by God's presence he doesn't need food or drink. I want to encourage you to **try prayer and fasting** this week. I'll even do it with you. After dinner Wednesday night, skip breakfast and lunch Thursday. When you get hungry, drive that hunger to Jesus and pray. *We abstain from food so we'll learn to hunger God.*
- Scripture.** When Moses is on the mountain, he encounters God through God's words. God speaks his name, his character, and then gives Moses a portion of the law again. We spend time reading the Bible because we believe the Bible is also God's words, and through them we can know God.

We seek Yahweh's presence through worship, prayer, fasting, and Scripture. And guess what happens when we encounter God for real? He **changes** us. Moses came down the mountain and his face was glowing, radiating. He looked like God, and it scared the Israelites. When we truly encounter God's presence, it's

going to be scary. People won't know what to do with us because we'll be so different, so counter-cultural, so Christ-exalting, so humble, so loving. I want to close with a question.

### ***Do you want God's presence?***

I was recently invited to a birthday party and the invitation said something like, "Please, no gifts. Your presence is a present enough." Have you ever read that line on a wedding or party invitation? "Your presence is the only present desired." If you were to send God an invite card to your life, what would it say? If we as a church were to send a party invite to God, what would it say? "Please, just gifts, no presence" or "Bring both yourself and your gifts" or... "Your presence is enough."

**Church.** Do we believe God's presence is enough? Do we long for the presence of Christ Jesus among us? Do we want him here? Is he the purpose of our ministry? I hope and believe it can be so!

**Believers.** Do you want Christ's presence in your life? Then cultivate a hunger for Christ. We seek God's presence through worship, prayer, fasting, and Scripture. But watch out, when you encounter Jesus, he will change you.

**Not-Yet Believers.** If you haven't tasted the presence of Yahweh, you're missing out. You're trying to fill that ache and hunger with creation instead of creator. Like a pool on a hot summer day or a warm fire in the middle of winter, our heavenly father is exactly what you need.

*Do you want God's presence?*

*Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).*