

Exodus 33:1-23 The Necessity of His Presence

Introduction

How long did it take to notice? A classroom in which the teacher is absent and the children merrily doing their own thing; an office from which the manager is away on business; a competitive sports fixture without a referee? What about a church carrying on its activities without the presence of the Holy Spirit of God? To assume that God will be here all the time no matter how we behave or how our hearts are towards Him is foolish and naïve. Jesus warned in Revelation 2-3, the letters to the Turkish Churches, that He would withdraw His presence if they did not love Him and serve Him as they ought to do. They could read of the warnings to the Israelites in the Old Testament, but it appeared complacency had set in- something the 21st Century church needs to guard against every bit as much as these early congregations. Without the active presence of God we are merely a religious club, instead of a group of people in fellowship with the living God. If we do not take Him seriously He will not work in our lives, in this church as He desires and offers to us in His Word. Are we taking God seriously seven days a week? How seriously do we take our calling for private and corporate prayer to plead for God to move in our midst? Moses here knew the importance of this subject because in Exodus 33:15 he declared (literally): *If you [God] don't personally go with us, don't make us leave this place.* How reliant, how dependent are you /am I on the presence and empowering anointing of God the Holy Spirit?

1. The Withdrawal of the Presence (Exodus 33:1-6)

(a) **The Reason** The reason for this extraordinary and solemn declaration by God was the act of blatant and conscious sin by the Israelites concerning *the golden calf*, recorded in Exodus 32:7-8. These verses state: *Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.* God's reaction is clear and His verdict chilling to the spirit of Moses. The Lord continued: *9 I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are a stiff-necked people. 10 Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation. 11 But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God.* Moses pleads for the people not because they deserved a different outcome –they didn't. The people believed in God; the calf was meant to be a representation of Yahweh on the grounds that Moses is not here, let's have something else to symbolise the presence of God, despite it being a clear breach of the Second Commandment to have no visual images representing God. They claimed a freedom that God had not offered. They sought to improve on what God had said and done. All of us are tempted at times to seek personal exemptions from some aspect of Scriptural teaching. This is how God views such decisions. Ultimately God isn't too concerned with the styles of services long or short; whether with music of varying styles or without; whether psalms, hymns or shorter songs predominate; which accurate Bible version we use; whether we sit in pews or chairs or meet in a sanctuary or a secular venue; or a whole lot more issues – what really counts is whether we are a people who individually and collectively are earnestly seeking God; are passionate about seeing people come to faith or backsliders

restored; How do each of us pray for a Sunday service; what are we asking God to do? If we ask for nothing -don't be surprised if that is the outcome. Remember Jeremiah 29:13: *You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with **all** your heart.*

(b) **The Risk** (Exodus 33:1-3) *1 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.** Continue doing the right things – in their case heading for the Promised Land. However, do not expect My presence; you are not taking Me seriously how can you expect Me to accompany you on this journey? This is not just an Old Testament issue. Jesus at the Last Supper gave an equally frank warning to His followers about their own spiritual lives. In the picture language of the Vine and the branches in John 15:6-8, He declared: *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; **apart from Me you can do nothing.** 6 If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.7 If you remain in Me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.8 This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.* God is not obliged to overlook our transgressions; we cannot presume on His amazing grace; the fact that we are treated by Him far better than our sinful conduct deserves is a ground for wonder and thanksgiving at His amazing patience and love. But we need the presence of God in our midst to go forward; on our own we can do nothing. When you and I are tempted to skip our personal times of prayer or Bible study; our attendance at prayers meetings or even regular Sunday services, remember these words of Jesus. The less we, in practice, depend on Him the weaker will be our relationship with Him and the effectiveness of our service for Him will also be correspondingly less. At the start of a New Year we must make a point of prioritising God's place in our lives, our schedules –the first place, not somewhere in the mix of things 'to do'. The failure to take God seriously in much of Western Christianity in recent generations has resulted in spiritual apathy and unfitness to receive the potential blessings He wants to pour out on His children.*

(c) **The Response** (Exodus 33:4-6) *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.* Removal of ornaments was a sign of humility and serious mourning for something in that cultural context. The pretence that all was okay had gone and the people of God began to take their relationship with their Heavenly Father more seriously. When we cry out to our Father then He delights to respond to the cries of His obedient and earnest children. In November 2000 in the Free Church of Scotland congregation in South Uist and Benbecula held their first communion season during the new pastorate of Rev. Iain MacAskill. The minister was asked to give an account of the weekend. His report included the following lines: 'Our first communion in South Uist and Benbecula has been the most amazing experience where God came down in awesome power. A lot of prayer was made leading up to the weekend and God answered. People who were The Lord's were given strength to come forward and people whom we've been praying for in the congregation were converted over the weekend. On Friday night we had six come to the Session including two local girls from an RC background. On Saturday we had four more plus Chris Macrae who is applying for the Ministry. On Sunday we had our Evangelistic service in the morning in South Uist with over 60 in attendance. The Session met with four others after the service. Many spoke of real conviction of sin and there was much brokenness in evidence. The Sacrament was celebrated in the evening with 140 in attendance. Our thanksgiving prayer meeting on Monday evening was so moving it didn't finish until 11pm. Ryno

Morrison, one of our converts, went home on Saturday under deep conviction. He read his Bible and couldn't stop reading about Blind Bartimaeus. Ryno's prayer when he went to sleep was "Rabbi, I want to see" Kenny Macdonald's text on Sunday morning was –you've guessed it..."Rabbi I want to see.." I'll never forget the scene of Kenny (who himself is nearly blind) leading Ryno by the hand upstairs to the session room. Our assessor elders from Lewis who have been Christians for many years were moved by the whole experience. An unforgettable quote: 'Do you think Pentecost was like this Alasdair"... 'I don't know...but its better than Stornoway!!' The Spirit is still working in our midst with many onlookers at the evening service now reading their Bibles and asking questions –watch this space...To God be the glory ...for great things He has done [E-mail date 25 Nov.2000] In how many services in Scotland in the last ten years could anyone ask the question 'Do you think Pentecost was like this? Has anyone ever expressed similar sentiments about a service in a church in this town? In this congregation? We need to plead for the presence of God that He might come down in mighty power on us and on this community, for Jesus' sake and glory.

2. The Location of the Presence (Exodus 33:7-11)

7 Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the tent of meeting. Anyone enquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp.8 And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. 9 As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. 10 Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshipped each at the entrance to his tent. 11 The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young assistant Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

(a) **Its Significance** (v7) *outside the camp* The distinctive feature of Israelite life had been God's presence in their midst. Now because of their sin God had to separate Himself from them. Our sin separates us from God. Isaiah 59:1-2: *Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.* In the New Testament book of Hebrews (13:12) there is a reference back to this situation. *And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood.* To seek the presence of God for guidance, intercession, or to offer praise, for examples, we need to repent of our sins –an attitude of humility for our shortcomings. Hebrews (13:13, 15) goes on to say: *Let us then go to Him outside the camp bearing the disgrace He bore... Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise –the fruit of our lips that confess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.* The people of Israel, whether Moses or others could not meet Him in the camp –on God's terms in God's place –this was not a geographical issue more a moral and spiritual one concerning their hearts. It was a calling to prayer to seek His face. II Chronicles 7:14 *If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.* Do you 'need to go outside the camp' –in modern terms have the humility to accept you need Jesus for salvation? Or as a Christian to seek grace for a restoration of fellowship because of a sin issue that you need to address? Or as a Christian to let go of the pain and heartache caused by the wrongful conduct of other Christians? Isobel Kuhn one of the greatest 20th missionaries in China and Thailand had to overcome the grudge of a referee whose report caused her initial rejection by the China Inland Mission. This individual gave a false character reference that would delay her acceptance for overseas service by several years. In the extra years at home she worked in a young women's evangelistic mission in Vancouver, which turned out to be invaluable

preparation for the mission-field. Many of the girls she reached through this ministry turned out to be amongst her strongest prayer supporters in future years. She told numerous stories of the impact of intercessory prayer for her work. At the time she had definite struggles with some real heartaches but looking back Isobel could later see the hand of God in the midst of some of these unpromising situations [*Evangelical Times* March 2007, p.14]. When God places a desire on your heart to pray for someone or a situation of need –it is because He intends to work in that situation and invites your participation in this initiative through prayer. In 2012 will you be willing to commit afresh to earnest pray for the people and situations God places on your heart?

(b) **Its Symbol** (v9) *the pillar of cloud* In Exodus 13:21 there is an explanation of its significance. First of all **guidance**: *By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.* Then in Exodus 14 we see **protection**; 14:19-20: *Then the angel of God, who had been travelling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other; so neither went near the other all night long.* Psalm 34:6 *For the angel of the Lord is a guard; he surrounds and defends all who fear Him.* Next in Exodus 33:9 it is a symbol of **communion**; *As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses.* Fellowship between Moses and God; the people learned where to find that place of fellowship, that place set apart outside the camp; do you set time aside for fellowship with God? Our lives can be hectic but is there a space where we could hear the *still small voice* (NKJV) or *gentle whisper* (NIV) of God as it was described in I Kings 19:12. Here was an astonishing level of intimacy between God and His servant Moses, Exodus 33:11 records these extraordinary words: *The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.* It was not just Moses –what about his assistant Joshua? this verse speaks also of him: *his young assistant Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.* Here was a devotion to duty, yes, but more than that, it was a desire for fellowship with God. Moses was unique as Numbers 12:7-8 records: *When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.⁷ But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. ⁸ With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord.* We cannot copy the example of Moses, but that of Joshua's dedication to desiring the presence of God is an inspiration to us. To follow this example be warned it is a lonely place as few follow this path as Isaiah 59:16 declares: *The Lord saw that there was no-one, He was appalled that there was no-one to intercede; so His own arm worked salvation for Him and His own righteousness sustained Him.* We need the presence of God for guidance and protection, but above all for regular communion with Him.

3. The Restoration of the Presence (Exodus 33:12-23)

(a) **An Essential Requirement** (vs12-17) *12Moses 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 favour with me.'¹³ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour 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. Verse 14 is our assurance here: The Lord replied, My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. But we must never presume that this is automatic as although we cannot lose our salvation we can lose the blessings God has for us and the felt sense of His presence. Moses recognised the seriousness of this matter and so must we. He said in v15: Then Moses said to him, If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. Moses had interceded in Exodus 32 to save the lives of sinful Israelites now he pleads to secure God's grace and blessing, especially for a sense of the felt presence of God in their midst. James 5:16 declares: The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results (NLV). God is looking for earnest men and women who will plead to Him and for Him in this nation desiring to see His name honoured and uplifted both in the churches and in the nation. Can He count on you in 2012?

(b) *An Indescribable Privilege* (vs18-23) *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.* As a book Exodus tells the story of redemption from slavery through the covering of the blood of the lamb in Egypt, through the establishment of the sacrificial system to make atonement for the ongoing sins of the people. They gained their freedom but longed for more- the felt presence of God. Moses could not see God in all His glory as this is impossible for sinful creatures that would be utterly consumed. Yet God allowed Moses a glimpse of His glory, a sense of His amazing presence. In John 14:9 Jesus said some amazing words to Philip who had asked to see the Father. *He who has seen Me has seen the Father.* Knowing the presence of God gives us more confidence in the power of God. On one occasion in the early 1950s a Lisu tribal leader unexpectedly renounced a long-standing feud. Isobel Kuhn recorded the exact date so that she could find out who had been praying for that need. Months later an elderly supporter wrote giving that date and time that three ladies had stopped their household duties to give a whole morning to prayer for the Three Clans Village and were convinced at lunchtime that the prayers had been answered. Isobel made the following note in her papers: Now these prayer warriors were not seemingly of the earth's mighty ones. Mrs K was delicate, had a heart condition. Mrs W was expecting a serious operation, and Mrs J was going blind. All three were too frail physically to cross the small town and gather in one place, but each in her own kitchen was joined to the others in spirit [Evangelical Times March 2007, p.14]. Yet God used their prayers as a means of transforming a situation across the world in China or Northern Thailand. This is our God and we like these elderly saints have access to His heavenly resources.

John the apostle saw the exalted Jesus in His glory in Revelation 1 and fell at His feet awestruck by the sight –one day you and I will get that privilege in heaven.¹⁷ *When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.¹⁹ Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.* This is our God who declares: *My presence will go with you and I will give you rest...* May we be assured of His resources as we step out in faith for Him in this New Year, for Jesus' sake, Amen.