

I Will Not Go Up in Your Midst

Exodus 33:1-11

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 33. In Exodus, one of the great themes we have seen over and over, is that we are saved to worship. God not only brought His people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, in order to enter into a fruitful land, but also to glorify and enjoy Him forever. This was at the heart of what He was doing. It's not an incidental. That wasn't a trick that Moses used to try and get Pharaoh to let the people go for a little while so they could sneak away. Moses really did mean it, when he said to Pharaoh, "You need to let us go three days into the desert to worship God at the mountain which He has shown us, lest He strike out at us." For the very purpose of God was to bring children of Israel out of Egypt to be a worshipping people, as a body, as a family, as a community, to worship Him I spirit and in truth. And this is emphasized in various ways in the early stories of Exodus.

Then we come to Exodus 24 and the people of God are finally at the mountain. The Lord has brought them through the Red Sea, the Lord has brought them part way through the wilderness, and there they are at the mountain, and when the Lord Himself begins speaking to them at the mountain, what does He begin speaking to them about? Worship. Worshipping only Him. Worshipping Him only His way. And then after He has spoken to them and half scared them to death so that they stampede off into the wilderness and later have to be brought back again to the edge of the mountain, He brings Moses, the mediator, up on to the mountain and spends 40 days telling Moses about — worship.

And then, in Exodus 32, we discover what the children of Israel were up to while God was talking to Moses on the mountain about worship. They were worshipping while Moses on the mountain, learning about worship. But they were worshipping in their own way, by their own designs, at their own initiative, and God told Moses, that even as He was giving them the instructions about how the people of God might engage with Him, encounter Him, glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, the people were devising their own ways. And so Moses and Joshua went back down the mountain, and Joshua thought there was war in the camp. And Moses said, "Joshua, O that it were. It's not the sound of war you hear; it's the sound of singing, raucous singing, there's an orgy going on." And so God, through Moses,

pronounced His judgment on the children of Israel. He told Moses that He intended to destroy them there. They were saved to worship, and before they had yet had the opportunity to worship in the way that God had dictated to Moses on the mountain, they had gone after other gods, they had gone after God in the wrong way. And God said to Moses, "I'm going to destroy them here." And Moses prays that glorious prayer of Exodus 32, and he begs the Lord, for the sake of His covenant promises, for the sake of His great name, for the sake of His great mercy, for the sake of His witness to the Egyptians and all the nations, not to destroy His people. And God in His mercy, withholds, restrains His judging hand.

That brings us to Exodus 33, and now we find the way forward. What will happen in the wake of this rebellion? What impact will this have on the rest of the journey through the wilderness? What will this mean about the ultimate destination of God's people? What will this mean for their purpose in life? Let's look at the first eleven verses:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way." When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.'" So the sons of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward. Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting that was outside the camp. And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we sense some of the gravity, the significance of this word, even as we read it. We ask that You would open it up, that we would understand it and that You would show us the fickleness of our own hearts, prone to wander, Lord we feel it, prone to leave the God we love, here's our heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Your courts above. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

This great passage divides into three parts. The first three verses are a description of the withdrawal of the blessing of the presence of God. The whole purpose of God's instruction to Moses on the mountain, for the building of this tabernacle, was that as the children of Israel journeyed on their way into this blessed land of promise, God was going to be right smack dab in the middle of them, surrounded on every side by His people. And He was going to go up like with them into the land. But in the first three verses we learn that something drastic is going to be changed about that plan.

Secondly, in verses 4-6, there is the response of Israel to this announcement, and they are contrite. There is repentance here, no doubt about it. It is obvious not only from what they do, even if their taking off their ornaments was only in response to what Moses has said, for the passage seems to intimate that their action was a response to not only what Moses said but also an automatic response on their part. Certainly, from the way they treat Moses at the end of the passage, a change of heart can be seen. The same people who, just a few hours earlier, had been saying to Aaron, "This man who brought us up from Egypt," have suddenly changed their attitude. We see contrition here. There is repentance.

Then thirdly, in verses 7-14, this favored presence, this communion, this fellowship with God has with Moses at the tent of meeting outside of the camp, and it speaks of the relationship that the people of God have lost. And it also exalts Moses in the eye of the people as God disciplines them with His distance.

I. The greatest blessing we have is God Himself and one of the sublimest enjoyments that we can have of him is an assurance of His presence, His nearness, His concern, and His favor.

God announces, in verses 1-2, some surprising news. Moses has just been begging God to spare Israel. The prayer is that He would not destroy them in the midst of the wilderness, and in God's mercy, He does relent, He does not destroy them utterly. Furthermore, in verses 1-2, it appears as if He is about to say that everything is going to be as it was, back on the road to Canaan. "I'm going to bring you into the Promised Land, just as I told you I was going to do at the outset, just I told Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I'm going to take you up into the Promised Land. And just as I told you before, I'm going to send My angel before you, and I'm going to drive out your enemies before you and I'm going to prepare

the way and I'm going to protect you and I'm going to plant you in the land." But in this passage, in verse 3, after God had promised to bring His people into this land flowing with milk and honey, we run into a disheartening phrase, "I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way."

And it's very clear to Moses and to the people of God, and this is seen in verses 4-6, that this statement by God is the greatest possible disaster, and that nothing that He has said in verses 1-2 about taking them into the land of promise, could possibly make up for what He is saying that He will withdraw. He's saying, "I will give you the land, it will flow with milk and honey, you'll be filled with plenty, you'll be protected from your enemies, but I will not be in your midst." Now, on the one hand, God is saying that as we go up, I will not be the midst of you in that tent. I will not be in the midst of My people, because My people rebelled against Me.

Notice also that God does not call them His people, as He had in chapter 5:1, "My people whom I will bring out of the land of Egypt." They are still "the people I brought out of the land of Egypt." That's a little improvement from Exodus 32 where God called them "Moses' people," but there is distance there, even in the descriptive words. Also, God did not say "My angel would go before them." When God says, "My Angel," in the Old Testament He's speaking of an extension of His own presence. So often we see this as a preincarnate manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He doesn't say that here. "I will send "an angel" before you. The indication is that God will provide, God will protect, God will plant, but God's presence will not be there. The greatest blessing we have, period, is God Himself. And the greatest, the sublimest possible enjoyment that we can have of Him is an assurance of His presence, of His nearness, of His concern, of His love, and of His favor. God is saying, "I will give you all the other blessings, but I'm not going to be with you in your midst."

And the people of God, the people of Israel, give them credit, they don't view as pretty good outcome considering the alternative. Remember, the alternative was total destruction. And their response to this announcement, "OK, I'm not going to destroy you, I'm going to give you all the blessings I originally promised, but I'm not going to be with you." They receive that as if God had given them a death sentence. And I want to ask you a question: If God dangled that proposition in front of you, how would you respond. "I'll give you everything you want. I'll give you joy in this life. I'll give you happiness in this life. I'll give you a good marriage. I'll give you a good career. I'll give you wonderful children. I'll give you power. I'll give you glory. I'll give you influence. I'll give you a lasting legacy. I'll even give you heaven in the hereafter, but you can't have My presence." How many evangelicals would love that bargain today? Was it Samuel Rutherford who said, "Heaven would not be heaven, if He were not there." Didn't he say in another place, "Heaven would be hell, if He were not there." And isn't this passage a reminder, a reminder in an opposite way of the same thing the book of Job reminds us of, that without God everything is nothing, and with God is everything.

And bless their hearts, these people understood this better than I understand it, better than we understand it sometimes. The greatest blessing we have is God Himself, and one of the sublimest enjoyments we can have of Him is in the assurance of His presence and His nearness and His concern and His favor, and when God says, "I'm not going to be in your midst," the people of God realize precisely what they're losing.

And isn't it ironic, my friends, that they lost this precisely because they tried to get that presence the wrong way. You see, they wanted something that would give them a tangible experience of the presence of God, and so they said, "Make us a cow." And in doing that, they lost the presence of God with them, because you can't have God's presence your way. He doesn't operate on your terms. He operates on His terms. And we engage with Him only on the terms that He proposes, and only through the way in which He Himself accomplishes for us. And isn't that one of the great lessons of the whole golden calf incident, and an important lesson for us today. You've heard friends bargaining with God. "Lord, if You could just get me out of this fix, then I'll do 'x' for You. I'll get down to the business of loving You and going after You." And God doesn't operate on our terms that way. If we want His presence, we approach Him on His terms, and that means for us bowing the knee to Jesus Christ, who is the term of communion with God.

II. Israel in seeking what they lacked by their own means, and not God, lost what they longed for and realized what they had done.

In verses 4-6, we see the actions of Israel in repentance. There's contrition here and there's an outward expression of it. When the people hear this sad word, they go into mourning, and none of them put on their ornaments. Israel clearly gets the point. Those ornaments which had been used to create an idol, now as beautiful and precious as they were, looked ugly to the people of God. They put them away. This was a typical sign of mourning in the near eastern world. Just as a woman would adorn herself in plain black to mourn her husband, so also when you were in mourning you took off the finery and ornaments. But it was especially appropriate in light of the fact that these ornaments had been used to sin grievously against God. This was an expression of the people's repentance. Israel, in seeking what they had lacked, the presence of God, by their own means, and not God's, lost what they had longed for.

It's poignant, isn't it. We're told later, that when Moses would go to the tent of meeting, the people of God would stand at their tents and worship. God's plan had been for them to come to His tent and worship Him, and because they had rebelled against Him, they are at a distance from Him, back at their own tents. They had wanted His presence, and they had lost it by seeking it the wrong way, and they knew it, and they mourned.

III. Moses' communion was a tangible reminder of the lost presence of God, and in the end, their only hope of regaining it.

Finally, in verse 7-11, in contrast to the distance between God and His erring people, there's this communion between Moses and God. God favors Moses with this intimate presence, this presence that transcends anything else in the Old Testament. It's an amazing thing. Moses is the beginning of the prophetic era in the Old Testament. Moses is the first great prophet. Later there are prophets in the periods of the judges, then Samuel, then great prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the later prophets such as Malachi, but their relationship was not like this. With Moses you are going up to the peak. But after Moses, there's no prophet that equals Moses in the Old Testament, there's no prophet that communes with God face to face. Here and in Deuteronomy we hear that phrase, God communed with him "face to face," and in Numbers, He communed with him "mouth to mouth."

Moses' communion is a tangible reminder to the people of God of what they lost, because God's purpose was to be right down in the midst of them, and in their rebellion they lost that presence. Finally, in the end, their only hope of regaining it was Moses. And isn't that ironic. They rejected Moses, they acted as if they couldn't remember his name, had no idea what had become of him, spoke of him derisively, and now see them, Moses making his way through the camp out to the tent of meeting. And as he goes, the word spreads, "Moses is going out." And what do they do? They come to the door of their tents and stand and watch out of respect for the mediator, for they understood. This is God's mediator, this one was the way that God had told us that we would experience the revelation of His word and the nearness of His presence. In fact, we even asked God that he would be the one that would convey God's words to us when we were frightened by God's words at Mt. Sinai. And somewhere along the line they had forgotten that. But now, through this grievous loss, here they are, watching this man go out, and whenever Moses went out, the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and watch him. Moses is walking by. That's the mediator. And they stand. And when they see Moses go, and see the pillar of cloud come down, they realize that it was God's design for that pillar of cloud to be right in the middle of them. But they worship at a distance as Moses communes with God.

What happens next. Well, we need to dwell on this awhile, for we will never appreciate what happens next until we realize what we lose when we lose the presence of God. And one of the sad things is that we have become so accustomed and fattened by the lavishness and plenty of the blessings that God has given us that in our own hearts and lives we have come to care more for the blessings than the Blessor, and more for the gifts than the Giver. And is this not a standing memorial, a monument to the sheer folly of that, because without Him, nothing else matters. Without the presence of God, without the favor of God, without communion with God, nothing else matters. Because what is worship?

It's glorifying and enjoying god forever, and if you can't have His presence, how can you glorify and enjoy Him?

You see why this is so cataclysmic, what the children of Israel have done to God's plan. It strikes at the very heart of the purposes of God, and this lies behind every injunction of Christ when He says to us, that "you cannot serve God and Mammon, you'll hate the one and love the other." God and God alone will demand our loyalty, He'll demand our loyalty on His terms, and He grants His presence as we respond in faith and hearing and embracing those promises. But if we choose the blessings apart from Him, or if we seek the blessings instead of Him, or if we seek the blessings our way, we lose Him and eventually lose all the blessings.

Where are you today? Can you sing with honesty, "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart? Naught be all else, save what Thou art." Can you sing with Martin Luther, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, the body they may kill, His truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever." Let's pray.

O Lord, draw us to Yourself, make us to want Your glory and presence Your way, above all else and we'll give You the praise and glory for it, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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