

GUARANTEED: Claiming the Sure Promises of God**“The Promise of God’s Presence”****Exodus 33:12-23****July 14, 2019****Sermon by Larry Parsley**

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Series Intro

I'm sure you've done it dozens of times.

- You purchased a product, and the product came with a guarantee or warranty -- that if it failed to work over a certain period of time, you could bring it back and get a new one.
- And you walked into that store and asked to see someone in charge, and you showed them your piece of paper, your receipt, your guarantee, your warranty.
- And you had the full expectation that it would be honored (and chances are, it was).

One of the most remarkable things about the God of the Bible is that He makes outlandish promises. And they're completely one sided.

- It's not like God owes us these warranties because we purchased something from him. Out of sheer grace, God has extended to us these guarantees or promises.
- And yet, remarkably, the average Christian fails to take them seriously. We fail to hold God to his Word and claim these promises.

In this series, I want us to look at a number of the most remarkable promises of God, and lovingly, gently, humbly, yet confidently, claim these promises.

- Preview – peace, joy, and power (you won't want to miss them).

Introduction

This morning, we are going to examine one of the most beautiful promises that God makes repeatedly to His people, and that is the promise of His presence.

- Our passage is found in a key point in the journey of God's people in Exodus.
- Exodus tells the story of God using a flawed servant named Moses to lead God's people Israel out of captivity in Egypt and toward the direction of the Promised Land.
- Now, as crazy as it might sound, the Bible teaches that Moses and God were friends.¹ Moses knew what it was like to experience God's presence, and yet he hungered for more and more of it.
- So with that in mind, let me drop you into the heart of the story in Exodus 33 (and then I promise I'll come back and fill in the back story for you).
- As I read, I want you to reflect on why Moses was so hungry for God's presence, and why God's presence is so important for us as well.

Read: Exodus 33:12-23

¹ Exodus 33:11 "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, the way a person speaks to a friend..." (NET)

BACKGROUND

Are you confused yet? Let me try to catch you up on the story.

In many ways, the book of Exodus is like one of those basketball games with wild momentum changes.

- One moment, your team is up by 10 points, and the next moment, you're down by 10 points.
- Which, by the way, corresponds to the story of our life with God, doesn't it? Sometimes we're flying high, and at other times (often through our own failures), we feel like we're 20 points behind heading into the fourth quarter.

That's what we find in the book of Exodus.

- We see these thrilling moments, such as when the people of God are walking through the Red Sea on dry land.
- But we also see some of the lowest moments in Scripture.

For example, in the chapter that precedes our passage, we see how the children of Israel get tired of waiting on Moses who has been up on Mount Sinai talking with God for weeks, and they decide to build their own idol to worship – a golden calf.

- And what we hear in this chapter may sound a bit shocking, but it is consistent with the kind of conversations we often see in the Old Testament between God and his friends like Moses and Abraham and Job.
- It is a conversational, interactive, back and forth kind of dialogue between Moses and God that may make some of us a bit uncomfortable.
- But really, prayer is designed to be a two-way conversation with God – speaking to God and listening for the way He speaks to us through His Spirit and His Word and through the believers He places in our lives.

I mean, it is almost like Moses is practically haggling with God, seeming to cause God to change his mind. In fact, if you have your Bibles open, you can hear this at the very beginning of Chapter 33.

- God basically says in those opening verses, *I'm going to fulfill my promise to you and lead you toward that Promised Land of Canaan. I will see that you are settled there safely.*
- *But here's the deal. I have decided not to go with you. I might destroy you if I did – I'm so frustrated with you -- and with all those shenanigans with the golden calf.*

What is God saying? He seems to be saying that He is heartbroken over their idolatry.

- The people don't seem to want God's presence anyway, so God is planning at the moment to leave them to their own devices.
- Now, when the people learn that God is essentially ditching them, they begin to

mourn.

- Not only that, Moses had a special prayer room that he liked to frequent, which was called the Tent of Meeting.
 - Moses rose to go out to that tent, that special place where he would meet with God.
 - And God's presence, in the form of a cloud descended onto that Tent. And that's where Moses and God have this amazing conversation, one which has as its theme the Presence of God.²

And I have this belief that if you and I were able to stand really close to that Tent of Meeting and eavesdrop on that amazing conversation, there would be a really good chance that what we would overhear would cause us to cry out for God's presence.

- In fact, in the time that remains, I want to try to reinforce your motivation to claim this promise of God's presence as your own.

Craving God's Presence: Negative and Positive Reinforcement

Now what do I mean by negative and positive reinforcement? I'm speaking here of the ways you and I are motivated to engage in certain practices and behaviors.

Take **parenting** for example. Parents all have different expectations for their kids, whether it is picking up their Lego's or cleaning their rooms or mowing the lawn or doing the dishes.

- And most parents have found ways to *motivate* their kids to do these behaviors, and to reinforce their obedience.

So, negative reinforcement is when you attach a punishment to a child's failure to comply.

- You say, if you don't mow the lawn, I'm taking your Xbox away. (*No, dad, anything but that!*).

On the other hand, positive reinforcement attaches a reward to the behavior that you're trying to reinforce.

- You say, *Hey, after you finish mowing the lawn, what's say we head on over to Buffalo Wild Wings. There's some new hot sauce over there that I want us to try out.*

I can remember when my kids were little, and maybe Jaletta had been gone for a couple of days, and the house was a wreck? (Pop Tart wrappers on the floor).

- I would make this little index card with doable tasks for the kids and say, "if you can complete all these tasks by 11:45, I'll take us all to Chic Fil A and let us trade in our

² NIV Application Commentary: Rebellion here is basically followed by Moses' mediation, which will ultimately lead to restoration.

educational toys for ice cream cones.”

- And you would be surprised how often that strategy actually worked!

As parents, we know that we need punishments and rewards, and that both of those methods are important, and both are motivating.

As I was reflecting on this passage, I felt like both dynamics were in play.

- You see, sometimes, like Adam and Eve, I have this tendency to hide from God’s presence.
 - I can’t explain it — it makes no sense, and it never worked out well for me.
 - But sometimes, we would rather build a golden calf of my own preferences than wait on God alone and His presence.
- And so what we need (just like that teenager) is both negative and positive reinforcement when it comes to God’s presence.
 - We need to know that bad stuff that will happen if I avoid God’s presence, and we also need to know about the blessings God is longing to pour into our lives when we walk in His presence.
 - And both ‘reinforcements’ are crucial.

And I want you to see how, in the first part of our passage (vss. 12-17), the net effect is a negative reinforcement, and in the second half, the positive reinforcement is breathtaking. So let’s begin with...

1. Negative Reinforcement: The Disaster of a Godless Journey

I want to pick this up in vs. 12. Once again, you and I are eavesdropping in on a very important conversation God is having with Moses.

- God’s heart has been broken by the fact that Israel has spurned Him. And one of the most devastating punishments the Bible addresses is that of God basically giving us what we ask for.
 - It’s as if God says, in vss. 1-6, *“Israel, if you don’t want me, you won’t have me. You can make the journey to the Promised Land, but no longer will you have My Presence leading you.*
 - *I’ll send an angel to guide you,³ but I won’t be making the journey with you.”*

You may remember that God had a powerful and visual way of leading His people through the desert.

- During the day, it was this peculiar cloud that went before the people.

³ Exodus 32:34; 33:2. See also 23:20,23

- *There goes God*, the people thought, and they would follow.
- But at night, instead of a cloud, God led this people as a *pillar of fire*, kind of like this floating lantern that led them in the right direction.

But now, God is saying, “You are on your own.”

- And what is so sad is that sometimes, that is exactly what we want. *God, I’m tired of you interfering with my plans. Let me do life on my own.*⁴
- And when God is no longer going before us, chances are something darker is leading us – maybe our appetites or our addictions, maybe our anger or our anxieties.

But Moses knew that this would have disastrous consequences for Israel.

- And in verse **12**, he basically tells God: “*I can’t lead these people on my own. I need your help!*”
- In verse **13**, Moses raises the stakes with God and says, in essence, “*God remember, this nation belongs to you. They’re your people, God. You can’t abandon them now.*”⁵
- And while God begins to let Moses know in vs. **14** that He will answer Moses’ prayer and accompany Israel, Moses is too afraid to let up with his argument now.
- And so Moses says in vs. **15**: “*If you ain’t going, don’t send us.*” *Lord, the worst thing that could happen is for us to try to do life on our own.*

And then I love how Moses seals the argument in vs. 16:

Exodus 33:16 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?”

Do you hear what Moses is saying? *God, you are the only thing we’ve got going for us!*

- *We are sinful; you are holy. We are ordinary at best, but you are extraordinary. There is nothing unique to any of us that can survive the obstacles we will face between here and the Promised Land.*
- *And we’ll make a total mess of the Promised Land too. God, the only thing that distinguishes us — the only thing special about us — is you.*

In my early days at our church we used to put this tagline on our business cards and letterhead.

- It said, “Ordinary People, Extraordinary God.”
- And in many ways, those four words still express my heartbeat.
- We are ordinary people.
 - I’m grateful for you, and for our facility, and for the resources God gives us

⁴ Keller: When God says, “I’ll give you everything but my presence,” some people think this is a dream religion: all God’s power without the hassle of having to worship him!

⁵ Ex. 33:13b - “Remember that this nation is your people.”

to help newcomers feel warmly welcomed here.

- I always want us to put as much hospitality and creativity into welcoming guests as possible – it is hard to be a guest and most of us have forgotten how anxious that can feel.

But our selling point is not US. Our selling point is our extraordinary GOD.

- God's presence is the one thing that can truly distinguish us.
- And it scares me to think that we would ever put our confidence in anything other than God's presence that animates this place.

Do you feel it? Does it motivate you?

- The negative reinforcement of imagining all the chaos that ensues when we move out of God's presence?
- I'm with Moses: "Lord, don't let us take another step without you!" I don't want to imagine that bad consequence.

But then the conversation takes a turn.

- As we're eavesdropping at the Tent of Meeting, watching this whole conversation between Moses and God take place, we get a whole new angle on God's presence.
- And this time, it is not the negative reinforcement that comes with trying to avoid the disastrous consequences of life without God. Instead, it is the...

2. Positive Reinforcement: The Glory of God's Presence

By the time we move toward the second half of our passage, God has decided to honor Moses' prayer and graciously give His presence freely to His people.

Exodus 33:17 "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."

What was that "very thing"? Moses asked for God's presence, and God said, "Done."

- Do you hear how God responds when we ask for His presence, through the name of Jesus Christ? He says, "I am so pleased to answer this sincere prayer."
- But Moses at this point doesn't know to leave well enough alone. God gives Moses an inch and Moses asks for a mile.
 - One commentator says that Moses won't take YES for an answer.
 - He says this most audacious thing in vs. 18

Exodus 33:18 Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

I love that! We've mentioned before that the Hebrew word for 'glory' is KABOD.

- It means *weightiness*. Glory is God's heaviness, His significance.
- God's glory is His beauty.

- When a planet reaches a certain weightiness, it develops its own gravitational field.
- Moons revolve around it.

That's God. God is glorious, weighty, significant.

- He is our defining reality, and our lives truly revolve around Him (whether we want to or not!).

Moses says, "God, show me your glory, your weightiness, your significance, your beauty. I want to be grounded in you. I want to feel the gravitational pull of your goodness."

- And when we get to know God's glory, we discover that His glory is not some raw and impersonal power, like the glory of an evil king.
- No, as vs. 18 says, God's glory is all wrapped up in His 'goodness,' His 'mercy,' His 'compassion.'

Now, when it comes to God's glory, there is a catch. Moses says to God (vs. 18): *I want to experience ALL of your glory.* But in vs. 20, God has to set limits on how much glory Moses will see.

Exodus 33:20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

I love this: Moses says, "show me your glory." And God says back, "You can't handle the glory!" *If you saw all my glory, it would kill you.*

Here's the truth: our God is a God of gracious mercy and holy power.

- But in our sinful state, we cannot handle his holiness. The message of the Old Testament is that if you touch the Ark of God with your bare hands, or if you try to look into the face of God with your unscreened eyes, you would perish.
- I know this is mysterious, and sometimes we have a hard time accepting God's mercy and His holiness.
- But the Bible is clear that God is both.

And our holy and merciful God designed an ingenious solution to this problem. He pointed to a rock that had a certain indentation or cleft in it.

- God says to Moses, "*Here's how I'll answer your prayer request for my glory. When I pass by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until my glory has passed by.*"

There was a hymnwriter named Augustus Toplady (you think that kid didn't get teased in school?).

- Anyway, Augustus Toplady wrote a hymn about this passage. He says that like Moses, we are sinful, and like Moses, we cannot come face to face with God's

holiness.

- But He says God came up with a solution. He found us a Rock, a cleft Rock, a Rock broken for us. Jesus is the Rock of Ages.

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.”

Jesus helps us experience the glory of God. The apostle John said of Jesus: “We have beheld His glory.”⁶ (see also 2 Cor 4:6)

Guidance for Practicing God’s Presence

What a promise! God promises us His presence, His mercy, His goodness, and as much of His glory that we can handle.

- It is only His presence that can distinguish us. And whether we realize it or not, we are made for fellowship with God.
- It is the only thing that can distinguish us in this world, and it is the only way we can find God’s promised land for us.

And I love that, throughout the Bible, God continually promises to give it to us.

Exodus 3:12 And God said, “I will be with you...”

Isaiah 58:9 “Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

Matthew 28:20 “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

John 16:7 “Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Hebrews 13:5 “...God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”

What would it be like for you to hang on to one of those promises this week? Maybe just meditate on it, to say it over and over in your mind? Maybe to turn it into a prayer?

- *“Lord, I thank you that even when I feel all alone, I am not alone. You promised not to leave me or forsake me. And so I rejoice in your presence with me. I draw strength from you.”*

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:6 (NIV) — 6 For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Because we desperately need His presence.

You know, my dog Humphrey has a split personality.

- When he hears an intruder at our front doorstep, he barks like a bully. He gives every impression of being in attack mode.
- But if Humphrey mistakenly thinks that all the humans in the house have left and he is stuck alone at home, and he can let out the most heart-rending cry of despair.
- He misses us. He misses our presence. He misses us, even when, unbeknownst to him, we are actually only a few feet away.

Conclusion

How much more do we miss the presence of our Savior! But He has not left home alone!

- And in our heart of hearts, we were built to crave his presence.
- Sure, sometimes we get distracted, and want to go bark at postal carriers and UPS people. But our hearts were built to be at rest with Him.

God has promised to be with us forever. Let's pray for His presence as the most precious thing in our lives. Let's pray for more of His glory