

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

Dr. Bill Mounce

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9. Presence of God

I. Why Did God Create Everything?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Why? Have you ever asked yourself that question? Why go to all the work of creating all of reality? Well, the Genesis story doesn't actually, at least explicitly, tell why he did it. One thing we know for sure is that God did not create the world because he needed anything. God did not create us because he lacked something. But it comes out of his mercy and out of his grace and out of his fullness. But why did he create all things? Well, there appear to be several reasons, but one of them is that God created us in order to have fellowship with us. He didn't have to have fellowship with us, but he wanted to have fellowship with us. He wanted to be present with his creation. That's one of the reasons why he created. And that's why the story in Genesis 2 is so important, the story of the Garden of Eden because there in the garden you have the picture of what God intended in creation, of God coming down being face to face with his creation and talking to them and walking with them. This is what God intended in creation.

A. God's Presence Disrupted

But of course, God's presence with his creation was disrupted, wasn't it? It was disrupted by human sin and that fellowship was broken. And as the story of the Bible unfolds, we realize that there are really two halves to this brokenness. On one hand, we have the fact that God is holy. We have the fact that God is totally and completely separate from sin and, in fact, he will not dwell in the midst of sin because he is such a holy God. That's what the book of Leviticus is all about and we're going to look at Leviticus next week. But the other side of the equation from God's holiness is human sin. And it is our sin that separates us from our holy and our creating God. So, on the one hand you have a holy God who wants to be present with his creation, and on the other hand you have sinful creation that desperately needs the presence of its creator. Thus, you have a tension and the Scripture becomes a record of a holy God dealing with human sin in order to restore his full presence with creation. That's what the story of the Bible is about: how a holy God could go through the work of redemption so that he can once again, as in Genesis 2, be fully present with his creation.

B. Exodus

As we read through Genesis and then into Exodus, we start to see this tension unfold more and more. For example, we looked at Exodus 6, verse 7, and the summation of the covenant where God says, "I will be their God and they will be my people." There's your balance, there's your two halves that God wants to be our God, he is our covenantal God and he is committed to doing certain things and to being certain things for us. But on the other hand, and I'm thinking here of the passage in Exodus 19:5 that we looked at a couple weeks ago, that if we are going to be the people of God, that if we are going to live as God's people, if we are going to live in his presence, if we are going to enjoy the blessings of the covenant and be part of the covenantal community, then (Exodus 19:5), "If you will indeed obey my voice, if you will indeed keep my covenant, then you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples." There's your balance: covenantal God, covenantal people. And it's that tension which among other things

leads to the Ten Commandments that we looked at last week, of the giving of the Ten Commandments, so we can know who God is and how that will work out in our lives. But that same tension, “I will be their God and they will be my people,” worked out in another way, which I want to look at this morning, and that’s the story of the tabernacle.

II. Tabernacle

A. Description of Tabernacle

The tabernacle was just a tent, a good-sized tent, and the tabernacle was a place where the presence of the holy God could dwell even in the midst of his covenantal and sinful people. That’s just the function of the tabernacle. It’s the place where God could be present to maintain his holiness even in the midst of people who sin. And so, the tabernacle is all about the presence of God in our midst.

B. Moses Goes Up Mt. Sinai

As the story unfolds, Moses goes up onto Mt. Sinai, we’re in Exodus chapter 25, and he’s going to go get the instructions for the temple and all the things that go in it. Exodus 25, starting at verse 1, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel that they take for me a contribution from every man whose heart moves him’ (in other words, it’s going to be a free-will offering)”, you shall receive the contribution for me.” And then God spells out the kind of things that they are to give and then in verse 8, “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.” That’s what the tabernacle is all about. To use our language, Moses is supposed to have a voluntary capital campaign. And as the people give the supplies, they will use the supplies to build a dwelling place for the very presence of God. So, Moses is up Mt. Sinai, he’s getting the plans for the ark, and the table, and tabernacle, and all the different parts of it. But meanwhile, back at the camp, there’s a party going on.

C. The Israelites Sin

We’re in Exodus Chapter 32. Moses has been gone for at least forty days. And you have to understand; it’s only been a matter of months. I mean, it was only a matter of months ago that these people saw the plagues, were drawn out of Egypt, walked through the Red Sea on dry land, and then just a few months later Moses is gone for forty days and it’s, “Well, I guess this guy and his God are gone. Hey, Aaron, here’s a bunch of gold. Make us an idol, we’ll worship him.” So they make the golden calf and they have a big party and they celebrate this monstrosity as supposedly the God who brought them out of Egypt. God’s up on the mountain talking to Moses. He’s not very happy. He interrupts and tells Moses what’s going on. Moses comes down and he has to punish the people. In a sense, what we see is the other side to 19:5 that “If you obey my voice, then you will be my treasured possession. If you don’t obey my voice, then you will be punished.” And initially God just wanted to wipe out the entire nation and rebuild the nation through Moses. Moses pleads with him, “No, don’t do that.” So eventually the sons of Levi come and they go through the children of Israel and they kill over 3000 people as punishment for their sins. But that wasn’t the worst of the punishment. The worst of the punishment comes in Exodus Chapter 32, starting at verse 33, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I’ve spoken to you.’” In other words, go to the

Promised Land. "Behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." See, the worst of the punishment is that God is going to withdraw his presence from the nation of Israel because he says, "If I visit you, I'm going to have to visit punishment upon you for your sin. I'll have to wipe you out because you are such a sinful, stiff-necked people." The greatest threat, the greatest punishment for their sin, is the withdrawal of God's presence among them as a people. The story continues in Chapter 33, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Depart, go from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt.'" That must have stung a bit. "To the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'to your offspring I will give it.' I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up among you lest I consume you on the way for you are a stiff-necked people." And then down in verse 5, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. If for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you.'"

The world really trivializes sin, doesn't it? It laughs at sin; it mocks our holy God. But God does not laugh at sin. He does not mock it. He punishes it, and we are seeing the other side of Exodus 19:5, but the worst in Moses' mind, the most fearful punishment, is God withdrawing His presence from his people.

III. Moses as an Example of Obedience

Now all of that is kind of on one side of the stage, if I can call this a drama. It's on the side of the stage of what happens if you do not listen to the voice of God, if you do not obey his statutes, if you do not delight yourself in him. On the other side of the stage stands Moses. And Moses is an example of a person who has continued to obey God, who has continued to do what God expects of him, and his reward, the word isn't used but that's the idea, the reward is that Moses gets to enjoy the presence of God in a way that no one else does. So, he's in the presence of God, the reward side of the drama. And in Exodus Chapter 33 you have two stories that emphasize Moses' enjoyment of the very presence of God.

A. Tent of Meeting

The first one is the story of the tent of meeting starting at verse 7. Evidently what Moses did was that he would go out of the area where all the people lived and would go to a tent when he wanted to meet with God. And God's presence would come down, the people would see it in worship, and that was when God and Moses got to talk to each other. They got to have fellowship with each other. In verse 11 we read, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend." And later on, in verse 34 we find out that when Moses left the tent of meeting because he had been in the presence of God his face shown so much so that he had to put a veil over it. What a marvelous picture of what God wants for his people. What a picture of what God wants more than anything else is to be in our presence and for us to be in his presence and to stand face to face and talk to him as a friend. This is the God of the universe and Moses speaks to him as a friend. Of course, Moses wasn't the first friend of God ever, was he? You know the passage in James that talks about Abraham, James 2:23, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God." Abraham was a friend of God. He responded in faithful obedience, and he was a friend of God. The same thing is true of Jesus' disciples and, therefore, the same thing is

true of you and of me. In John Chapter 15, starting at verse 14, Jesus says to his disciples, "You are my friends if you so what I command you. No longer do I call you servant, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends." Now we can't earn favor with God. I find myself making this qualification over and over again. I'm going to make it once and then I'm going to try not to do it again, all right? We cannot earn friendship with God, right? There is nothing that I can do. I can't obey every single rule in the world and earn friendship with God. My relationship with Jesus Christ, your relationship with Jesus Christ, starts on the inside. It starts with an admission of sin, the believing in Christ's death on the cross, in a commitment of our lives to him. It starts on the inside and then God renews our minds, he renews our hearts, and out of that comes our faithful obedience to him. Have we got the chronology straight? When we are friends of God we are not earning favor with him, but because of what God has done in our lives, that as we want to obey him, just as Moses wanted to obey him, just as Abraham wanted to obey him, that part of the privilege and the reward is that we are his treasured possession. That we talk to him face to face, that we talk to him as friends. That's something totally different than religion because it starts on the inside and it works out. Tent of meeting.

B. Moses Hidden in the Cleft of the Rock

But there's another story in Exodus 33 that I believe is making the same point and actually makes it much more strongly, and it's the story of Moses being hidden in the cleft of the rock. It's one of my favorite stories. This story is asking a question, and the question is: what ultimately defines the people of God? What ultimately defines whether you are I are a friend of God? See, what's happening is that Moses is still really concerned that God said, "I'm only going to send an angel. I will not go in your midst." Moses goes and he pleads to God to keep his presence with them. Look at Exodus 33 starting at verse 12, please. "Moses said to the Lord, 'See You say to me, 'Bring up this people', but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.'" In other words, "If you're not going to go, I don't know who is going." "Yet," (point two), "Yet you have said, 'I know you by name and you have also found favor in my sight.'" See, Moses is building a syllogism here, did you see that? "Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight." In other words, Moses is saying, "God, I want to know you. I want to know more and more of who you are so that I can be obedient to you, but I need to know more so I can know what you expect of me." And then he kind of adds a little extra. "And consider, too, that this nation is your people," Moses is saying politely. "Not just my people, they're your people, too, God." And God said, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." So, God commits to Moses that his presence will stay. What Moses really wants to emphasize to God, that it's really important that his presence stay with them. And so, he continues the discussion in verse 15, "And Moses says to God, 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.'" In other words, "If you're not going to go with us, I don't want to go to Canaan. I don't want to go to the Promised Land. I'd rather be in your presence than in a land flowing with milk and honey without your presence." "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people. Is it not in your going with us, in your presence so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth?" And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do. For you have found favor from my sight and I know you by name." See, Moses is telling

him, if I could expand, the Jews have all kinds of religious traditions, right? They have 614 Deuteronomical laws that they follow. You know, don't boil a kid in his mother's milk. I have to qualify that that's a young goat, not a disobedient child; part of their dietary laws. I mean, they've got all sorts of human traditions, really, divine traditions because God gave them to them, all kinds of religious rituals that define who a Jew is. I was trying to order a microphone yesterday from a place back in New York. It was ten minutes to 5:00, he said, "I'm sorry we're closing down until Sunday morning." That's right, this company is run and owned by Jewish people. Their Sabbath is starting, they're shutting down early, and they'll be open Sunday morning. The Jews have all these traditions from Scripture and then some that define who they are. But that wasn't what defined them the most, and that's what I want you to see. Moses had the traditions, he had the religious rituals to go through, but that wasn't what was most important to him. What was most important to Moses, what would separate out the people of God from all other people was not something external, it was something internal. It was the very presence of God. And Moses understood that that was key to who they were as his people. That's what's going on in this passage.

Verse 18, "Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.'" This is kind of a third step. Moses was concerned that God had said he would only send his angel. Moses pleads for God to go with them. God agrees. Moses emphasizes that he wants God's presence to remain and God agrees, but there is still one more step. Moses wants to see God's glory. Moses wants to experience God's presence. Moses wants to know more about who God is and so in Chapter 33, starting at verse 18 we read, "Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.' And God said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, the Lord.'" As we learned the other day, Yahweh. "'And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' But he said, 'You cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live.' And the Lord said, 'Behold there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock and while my glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of a rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. And then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.'" So God says, "You have wanted to see my glory. I will show you my glory." Moses goes up the mountain and in Exodus 34 starting at verse 6, "The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'" See, he's revealing himself to Moses so that Moses can know more of him and obey his ways more fully. "By keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." And how else could you respond to that epiphany, that vision of God, other than what Moses does, verse 8," And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped and he said, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us. Please.'" In other words, "Please do not withdraw your presence from us. Please."

C. ABC's of the Gospel

And then listen to the three points that Moses makes, "For we are a stiff-necked people and pardon our iniquity and our sin and take us for your inheritance." Now if that's not the gospel message, I don't know what is. I don't know how you can say it any more

clearly than Moses says it here in verse 9. I often use the ABC's to share the gospel that we Admit we're sinners, that we Believe that Christ's death on the cross paid the penalty for our sin, and that we've Committed our lives to him as our Lord and Savior. And that is what Moses is saying right here, "God we are a stiff-necked people. We are sinful and we are separated from you. Pardon our iniquity and our sins." Moses understands there's nothing that he can do to get forgiveness, it has to be granted by God freely and mercifully. "And then take us for your inheritance. We are your people, we are your special people," Moses says. If that's not the gospel message, I don't know what is.

At the deepest level, the people of God, the friends of God, are those who enjoy the presence of God at its deepest level. Doctrine is important, you know me. Doctrine is important. Holiness is important, these things are all important. But what is lying down at the base of all this is Moses' desire to be in the presence of God, face to face, talking with him. That's the essence is what Moses is crying for and it's the essence of the gospel. It's something that's not external, but internal. Paul says the same thing in different words in Romans Chapter 8:9-11. He says, "You, however are not in the flesh, but in the spirit." In other words, "You're a disciple." "If in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him, but if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." You hear it over and over again in the passage that we are defined as people in whom the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, dwells. That's the gospel message.

When I was teaching back in seminary one of the really cool things that I got to do was to co-lead a tour to Israel and we got to go quite a few times. And our tour guide every time was a guy named David. David was an Argentinean Jew who had immigrated to Israel when he was very young. He was, oh, about that short of being a Zionist. He loved his country and he must have had the gospel shared with him a million times. That's what happens when you keep taking seminary students to Israel. David just was not receptive, but to know David is to love him. And one of the best days was the day that we would get up at 4:00 in the morning to get through Egyptian customs and to drive to the St. Catherine's monastery which is the base of Mt. Sinai and then we climbed Mt. Sinai. Those of us who were wimps took camels most of the way. And as we were going up Mt. Sinai the last time I had a fascinating discussion with David. And I'm going to show you a video clip of this in just a second. It was a time we were going up and I said, "David, the top of this mountain..." And we don't know for dead certain that this is Mt. Sinai. We're very, very sure it is, but if this wasn't Mr. Sinai, it is just like what Mt. Sinai would have been like. We're going up the mountain, I on the camel and David walking, and I said, "David, when we get to the top..." It was kind of flat; you can kind of spread out. And I said, "Can I read Exodus 33?" And he looked at me with the blankest look on his face and he said, "Well, we always read Exodus 20, the giving of the Law." I said, "I know, you can read that, that's fine. But can I read Exodus 33?" And he looked at me and said, "Why? Why would you want to read Exodus 33?" And I said, "Because, David, somewhere around here in one of the clefts of the rock, God placed Moses and all of his goodness passed by. I want to read Exodus 33." He says, "Fine. I'll do 20 first and then you do 33." And it hit me harder than it ever had before

the difference between a Jew and a Christian, or really the difference between anyone who's not a Christian and a Christian. David is a non-Messianic Jew. He does not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and he is defined by the Ten Commandments, external rules and laws. That's what David is, and he follows them zealously. But I'm a Christian and while the Ten Commandments are important to me, the thing that's most important to me is that God is present in my life. And while I was standing on top of Mt. Sinai, that's what was overwhelming, overwhelming to me, that somewhere around here the presence of God had passed by. To know David is to love him, he's just that kind of guy. But David is defined by external criteria only, by religious traditions as good as they are. He is not defined by the presence of God and somewhere up there Moses was pushed by the hand of God into the cleft of a rock and his goodness, His presence walked by.

IV. Why Did God Create Everything?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Why? He created them to be present with his creation, to have fellowship with us as friends. But because he is holy and we are sinful, something special had to happen. And the something special for Moses was the tabernacle. There was the place where God's holy presence could dwell even in the midst of sin. But for you and me that something special is the person of Jesus Christ. In John 1:14 it says, "The Word became flesh, Jesus became flesh, and tabernacled among us," that's what the verb actually says. That he was the tabernacle, that he was the very presence of God in our midst. That's why Jesus can say to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." It's why on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus went up with Peter, James and John, and the fact that Jesus was God shown through, that he shown the way he did. And Moses came down and once again got to look into the face of God in all its radiance and in all its beauty. And someday, someday, you and I who are disciples of Jesus Christ will also be able to see him face to face, to walk hand in hand and to talk directly to him. Someday we will be able to enjoy his presence in an unmediated way. We will once again be in the Garden of Eden. And Revelation 22 at the end of the New Testament where we are with him face to face, the Tree of Life is there. It was in the Garden of Eden and it's waiting for us in the final Garden of Eden.

The question of the story of the tabernacle is simply: are you part of the people of God? Are you defined purely by external things even if they're good external things? Or are you first and foremost a person in whom the Spirit of the living God lives, in whom the Spirit of the living God dwells and is at work changing our hearts and changing our minds. And then out of a changed heart and out of the enjoyment of being in the presence of God, as imperfect as it is in this sinful world, we are still working out of his presence as the Spirit works in us. And it is out of that presence that we desire to please him. And this is how he is our God, and we are his people: by the presence of God that dwells inside of us.

If that is not true of you this morning, I would encourage you to read the verse of Moses, to admit that you are a stiff-necked person, sinful and separate from God, to cry out to God to pardon your sin because there is nothing that you can do about your sin. Only Jesus on the cross can care for your sin. And then to invite him into your life to commit your life to him, to become his treasured possession, to be God's inheritance.

And then someday, we all get to leave this rock and go home. That's the story of the tabernacle.

Let's pray: Father, we are imperfect beings and even for those of us who have been forgiven by your mercy and grace, sin is still in our hearts. But O God, we cherish knowing that you are present in our lives. We cherish those times of obedience where we can actually experience your goodness. We know it's there, but when it consumes us, O Father, we are so thankful for the life to which you've called us. Like Moses, Father, we cry out that we may know you more so that we can follow your ways. But Father, the only reason that we can say that is because we are a stiff-necked people. We are sinful and separated from you. We have acknowledged that forgiveness from sin lies only in you, only through the death of your son on the cross. And Father, if there's anyone here, we pray that they will confess to you, anyone here who needs to, to confess to you, Father, that we now belong to you, that we are your treasured possession. You have forgiven us of our sins. Thank you for living in our midst. We look forward someday to coming home to the room that you have prepared for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.