

A People of God's Presence  
Pastor Ashley Brown  
Wasilla Bible Church  
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If you were to ask me to tell you about my wife, Sarah, I could tell you all kinds of fun little tidbits, all kinds of fun little facts about her. Sarah Elizabeth Lebhart, at the time, was born on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977. I could tell you she was born at Ft. Rucker, Alabama. I could take you down the road here and show you the house where she grew up. She grew up not too far from here. Tell you all about the school she went to. I could tell you that she loves Jane Austen. I could also tell you that, like, Elizabeth Gaskell—an author who's like Jane Austen. There's this one book that drives her nuts. It's called "Wives and Daughters." Why? Because the author died before she got to write the end of the book. Sarah did not figure this out until she was about halfway through the book, and the book is this thick, right? But she loves the movie, so she had to read the book. And she was distraught to find out that the ending that she loves so much in the movie wasn't in the book because the author died first. Her favorite drink at Kahladi's is a 16 ounce skinny half-Snickers® mocha. If it's later in the day she may go decaf; if it's earlier or it's just been a long day she'll definitely go caffeinated. So, you know, I could tell you all kinds of facts about Sarah.

But that's very different than if you ask me to tell you about Sarah, and I told you that she's my best friend. It's...you see, it's very different between me telling you a bunch of facts about her and me starting to describe the way that our two lives over the last eight-plus years, eight years of marriage and then additional time prior to that, our lives have been knit together in a way that she's my best friend. At the end of a long day, or at the end of a good day, I just can't wait to get to be with her. She is somebody where if we are apart, like when I was deployed a few years back, or if she's on some trip, it's just...it's almost like trying to operate...do life...with one arm tied behind my back. I just...it's not, it's not the same. It's something just very different to know her. And the simple fact that I tell you things like her favorite drink doesn't do anything for you to really *know* her. The bigger thing is to experience her, to just be with her.

We're gonna be talking about something kind of like this in our relationship with God today. You see, a lot of times I think that church in our culture, and even here in Wasilla Bible Church, sometimes we approach church and we approach God as if the whole point is just to know a whole bunch of facts about God. We approach church as if this was just a classroom. 'Let me show up and get my three steps to a better life, three ways to be a better father, mother, husband, wife, whatever; let me show up and find out, you know, the steps I have to take to be a successful person, get my family the way it should be to fix this problem in my life.' We approach it as though it's just about finding answers, it's about knowing facts about God, when in reality it's not about that at all. What it is, it's about experiencing His presence, having your life knit together with Him. There's a bit difference between the way that you may know my wife because of the facts that I just...and the insights that you may have into her because you now know her favorite drink, if you remember what it is from Kahladi's...there's a big difference between that and the simple fact that she's my very best friend. And there are times I can pull out the phone bills from when we were in college...yes, I think I still have them because I laugh at them...where there were times where I was in North Carolina at the time, she was up here, and we'd call up and we'd just sit there and we'd run out of things to say, so we'd just sit on the phone. And why? Because we just wanted to be together. We just wanted to be in each other's presence. We should be that way with God. That's God's desire, is that He would have a people of His presence. That's been His desire from the very beginning, in many ways.

So what we're going to do is we're going to look at Exodus chapters 33 and 34 today. And we're gonna see where we end up on this. To get you there, and to give you a little bit of the background, I'm just going to remind you where we left off. We left off with Jacob's son, Joseph. He had become the prime minister of Egypt. The Israelites had moved to Egypt. They were in a favored position. And that's basically where the book of Genesis leaves off. Now in Exodus chapter 1 it looks as though things are going to be going very, very well. The trajectory is such that they're going to prosper; it's going to be good for them. Why? In Exodus 1:7 it says that the Israelites...they were fruitful, they were increasing greatly, and they were multiplying. They were being prosperous, they were growing as a nation, they were in one of the most powerful countries in the world, and they were connected. The problem is that things didn't quite play out that way. You see, there was a pharaoh that came to power. And it covers this in verse 8 of chapter 1 in Exodus. And there was a new king who came to power who did not know, he didn't remember, he didn't feel any obligation to Joseph and to what Joseph had done for the nation. Instead, he looked at the Israelites and he said 'They are getting too powerful; they're becoming too numerous; we have to do something about this.' And so he enslaved them. And they spent quite some time enslaved to Pharaoh and to many pharaohs. They spent quite some time there.

And they cried out to God. And what we see in Exodus 3:7-8 is that God calls Moses and He says, 'Moses, I've seen My people's affliction, I have heard their cries, and I am going to deliver them.' And so He does just that, and He ends up delivering them. And through a series of works—miraculous interventions, miraculous events—He delivers them from slavery in Egypt. And not only that... I love right there, and He describes when He's talking to Moses, He actually says, 'This is how I am going to plunder Egypt.' He works their deliverance in such a way that they plunder the most powerful country in the world. And so they leave with all kinds of gold, jewelry...people are just throwin' stuff at 'em, sayin' 'Here! Get out of here! Just go! Leave!' That's the way God works it out.

And so they go, and He takes them to Mount Sinai. And here at Mount Sinai is where they finally just stop. And God says, 'Ok, we're gonna stop here for a little bit. And Moses, you and I are gonna have a meeting.' Moses goes ahead and he meets with God, and he goes up on the mountain. And while he is up there an interesting thing happens. It has only been a couple of months' journey since they left Egypt, and they have seen God working in numerous ways in that time...in everything from parting the Red Sea to bread, manna from heaven, all kinds of different provision that God has used to take care of them. And yet, while Moses is up on the mountain, I don't know. They got bored, they got impatient, they just thought, 'Hey, we don't have anything to do.' I don't know. But they decided they would go ahead and they would take their earrings, nose rings, toe rings...I don't know. Whatever. They would take their gold jewelry, they would melt it down, and they would make this calf—baby cow, an idol. And they decided that they would worship this idol, this false god, by having a drunken orgy. That's what they decided to do.

Imagine God's displeasure at this moment, ok? God is a bit displeased; He's a bit ticked off to say the least. He has delivered them. He has brought them here to make a nation, to make a people who know and experience His presence. And they've turned around and they've said, 'Yeah, we're kinda bored with all the fun, miraculous stuff that You do, so we're gonna make an idol and we're going to have...we're going to throw ourselves our own little party in worship of this false god. And so they do that, and God is very displeased. And what happens, in Exodus 33 and 34...I'm just going to sum this up and then we'll come in and we'll look at some of the passages here. Ok? What happens in Exodus 33 and 34 is God says, 'Listen, Moses, I am going to make good on My promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and Jacob. But My presence cannot dwell with people who do not have a heart towards Me. You are stiff-necked, obstinate people. So here's what's going to happen—I'm going to send you on ahead. You go to the land, I'll keep My promise, I will give it to you because you are the descendants of the people whom I made the promise to. You are the descendants of whom I spoke. I will keep that promise, but I will send an angel with you. And so that angel will drive everyone out of the land, and you can have the land. But I am not going to go with you, because if I go with you I'll kill you all.' That's what He says. He says 'I will destroy you. If My presence is with you...you are stiff necked. You are obstinate. You don't want Me. You don't want My presence.'

Moses turns around and he says, 'No. If that's the way it's gonna be, let us stay here. We wanna be with you.' And he intercedes on behalf of the people. And as he does so, he ends up asking that God would reveal His glory to him. He says, 'I just want to see Your glory.' And God says, 'Listen, nobody can see My glory and survive. But there's what I'm going to do. I'm going to shelter you in such a way that you can glimpse just even a fraction of My glory, of My full glory.' And He does that. And He proclaims His name to Moses at the beginning of chapter 34. He proclaims His name and He reveals Himself in a very real, experiential way. And it just seeps totally inside of Moses and is transformational for him.

And that's what we're going to look at today. But as I've been looking at this over the last couple of weeks it's something that...I don't know. The format here might be a little bit different, because I don't have these three or four or five or how many ever just amazing, life-changing truths of this and that and whatever. I don't. Moreso what I have is I have three questions that I'd like to talk with you about today...three questions that I pull from this passage that God has just been bringing up and bringing to my heart time and time and time again over the last week or two. And He has just been working me over on these. And I'm just gonna share 'em with you, and I'm gonna challenge you to wrestle through them as well. Ok, three questions that pertain to God's presence in my life. And I have left them in question format for this reason—this is stuff that I am still wrestling with, God's presence in my life. You'll see what I mean.

The first one is this. Do I desire God's blessings or His presence? Do I desire God's blessings, or His presence? What do I mean by this? If God promised me that He would give me... Last week we talked about if I could write my own story, kind of how it would look. You know, I mentioned I would love to have all kinds of money, whatever, I could buy cars, this, that, whatever. I would have, you know, all kinds of fun things that I could imagine in my story. If God said, 'Ashley, here's the deal. I will give you all of that, but you won't experience My presence,' which one would I choose? Which one would I choose? Do I really seek and desire His blessings, or His presence?

Plays out in Exodus 33, verses 1-3, and I kinda paraphrase up here on the slide. What God tells Moses is 'Listen...' He says, 'You go ahead and go to the land that I promised. I will send an angel before you and wipe out all the 'ites', all the different, you know, whatever 'ites—Canaanites, grouped; ok. I will push them out of the land and the land will be yours. And you will have prosperity. You can go to the land of milk and honey where dreams come true. But I am not going to go with you.'

If God had offered me that offer right there, would I have taken it? I mean, what He is saying is 'Listen...' The equivalent in my life would be, 'Ashley, I'll give you a successful job. You will have success in whatever you do. You won't have to worry about where you live; it'll be taken care of. And not only that, but I will insure your safety and security—not only for you, but for your family. You'll be prosperous, you will succeed; people will know your name. You don't have to worry about anything. You will have a good, comfortable life. But you won't have Me.' Would I take it? If I'm totally honest, there are times when I really don't know. Just bein' totally honest. That's a continual struggle in my heart, and I suspect that I'm probably not the only one. Why? Because so often I think we look at it and the reason that we come is because...the reason that we come to church or the reason that we seek after God is because 'I need God to fix this in my life, to fix my family, to help me figure out how to get my life straight, to fix this problem that I have with this other person or relationship, to fix something. And if that doesn't work I'm gonna go somewhere else where it will.' And really we aren't seeking God's presence; we're seeking His blessings.

That's why Moses' answer just strikes me, and it sticks out to me. In Exodus 33:15 what he ends up tellin' God is this is his response. He says, 'Listen, if Your presence doesn't go with us don't lead us from here.' Moses says, 'I would rather stay in the wilderness, not ever realizing prosperity, success, safety, any of these things. I would rather never experience any of that than leave Your presence.' That's what Moses says, and that amazes me. He goes on and he says not only that, but he says in verse 16, he says 'Isn't it by Your going with us, isn't it by Your presence, isn't it by that that we are distinguished from everyone else in the world? The only difference between me and anybody else, whether they are successful or whether they are totally in the barren wilderness of suffering and affliction, the only difference between me and them is the fact that I experience Your presence. So if You aren't going to go with me I don't care what I will get. I'll stay here.' That's Moses' response. That's a heart that honestly convicts me.

See, God's presence is the point, and Moses gets this. God's presence has always been the point. That is His point in all of history. You look at the garden, in the Garden of Eden...He came in the cool of the day to walk with Adam and Eve. How cool is that? You have a God who creates an entire universe, and He has a whole universe to do whatever He wants to do, and what's He choose to do every day? He chooses to go ahead and come down and walk with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day, every day. Why in the cool of the day? I don't know. Maybe it's just a more pleasant time of day and, you know, a nice summer walk along in the cool, you know, in the shade, whatever, as the sun is set. I don't know. But He came to walk in the cool of the day so that He could have this time of presence with these people whom He had created.

You look at the Exodus. God, in the pillar of cloud and fire—He brought this nation together and He led them, and He took them...and He took them through everywhere that they were going, and in a pillar of cloud and fire. And in day and in night His presence did not depart from them. When it would pick up and move, they would go, too. God's presence was the point! That's what distinguished them.

And Jesus...His name, Immanuel—God with us...it is God in the flesh who comes down to dwell with us on earth, to live through our sufferings. He's "God With Us". He's the One who came to reconcile me, a sinful person, to God who is holy, where if I experienced His presence he would destroy me because I am a stiff-necked, obstinate, stubborn person. I am. But Jesus came and He died, and He died a death that He didn't deserve so that my sins could be forgiven, so that I could be reconciled to God and to know Him.

And then you have Pentecost. The Holy Spirit, God Himself, comes down and indwells His people so that they will always be able to experience His presence. God's presence is the point. That's the whole point of why we exist! And so that's why that question—do I desire God's blessings or His presence—really strikes home in my heart. Am I desiring some other thing or His presence?

And that feeds into the second question—am I choosing my idols or His presence? Am I actively choosing—not only do I desire these blessings or these other things—but am I choosing my idols or His presence? That's the other question that I've had to wrestle with, the second of the three. Pulled this from Exodus 33, verses 5 and 6. It talks about how God, He looks down and these people had been worshipping some other gods, and He makes reference to their ornaments. Ok? He says...the Lord tells Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You're an

obstinate, stiff-necked, stubborn people. If I came up into your midst for a moment, if I brought My presence into your midst, I would destroy you. I cannot coexist with someone whose heart is not given over to Me. I can't. My presence cannot be experienced by that person. So if you want My presence, put off your ornaments. Strip 'em off.' These ornaments He's talking about, it's like charms, talismans, little idols that you would carry around as part of your worship. It's the little 'Buddha belly' that you're sittin' here and you're like 'rub the Buddha belly for good luck', whatever, you know, and keep it close by because 'it will bless me.' Ok? It's these things.

But here's...I know we don't do all the carvings and everything else in our modern, western, American society, but we do have idols. In my own life I look back and the idol I have probably struggled with the most, honestly, has been work. I can be someone who is a workaholic. Especially when I was in the military it was very, very, very, very, very easy to, you know, to justify long hours spent away that honestly I didn't have to spend away from my family. Why? Because it made me feel good about myself. If I get a pat on the back it boosts my self...it made me feel more self respect. It felt good to get the approval and the praise from other people. And I made an idol out of my own praise and value that I got through work. That's one thing.

Another thing...probably another thing that I have seen moreso than any other idols as I've worked with primarily younger people over the course of the last two years is an idol of relationships. That's where, ok, if this person will just love me... And here's the crazy thing—half the time they are a person who does not love God. When this is an issue, a lot of times... 'ok, I'm going to choose to pursue intimacy with this person who does not love God, and still yet I'm going to say that I want God's presence; but I'm not going to let go of this even though I know they're going to pull me further and further away from God.'

We have all kind of idols—relationships, work, our families. We have all kinds of things that we look at and we say, 'Well no, this is more important,' and we let it pull us away from God. The Israelites, they went ahead and chose to strip off their ornaments, to give up their idols, and to pursue God. They didn't do so faithfully all the time. They went back and forth, but God in His faithfulness continued to draw them to Himself. If I look at it throughout my life, I struggled with idols. I do. Other things become more important to me than God's presence.

There's a third question here that I've been struggling with over the past couple weeks, and it's this question. Am I earnestly, continually seeking to be with God? This is...this is probably the most convicting to me, personally; it's probably the most convicting because I looked at it and I was in awe. And I was just like, 'Man, that's not me!' I looked at Joshua. Joshua was Moses' aide. He was a servant to him. And what happens is every time that they would stop and they would make camp, they would go ahead and they would put what was called the 'Tent of Meeting'—it was the place where the tabernacle would be, it would become once they settled, the temple; they would make a temple; it was kind of like the temple that went with them in the wilderness. It was the place where God would come down. And if anyone wanted to meet with God, if anyone wanted to experience His presence, all they had to do was go out to the Tent of Meeting. And so Moses would go out there all the time. And something that's really cool is it says that the Lord used to speak to Moses face-to-face like a man speaks to his friend. And here is where I'm really convicted. Joshua, Moses' servant, would go out there and follow him, and he wouldn't...he'd just go out there and he would sit down at the tent, and he would sit there. And Moses would get done talking with God as a friend, and Moses would say, 'Ok, I'm goin' home for the day. I'm punchin' the clock. I'm headin' home. I'm outta here.' And Joshua would say, 'Ok, I'll see ya tomorrow.' And he'd just stay there. He just wanted to be in God's presence.

And I look at it and honestly, I look at it and I'm convicted. Why? Because, to tell you the truth, so often I come to church and I'm coming for all kinds of reasons. And this is the way it's been for years. And I'm not necessarily coming to experience God's presence. And not only that—it's something that it's kind of like, 'Ok, I'll check it off the block.' Joshua, he said, 'No, I always wanna be in God's presence.' Why is it that sometimes I can get more excited about a Duke-Carolina men's basketball game—go Tar Heels! That's right, yes, I am still a Tar Heel fan. But why is it that I can still get more excited about that at times than I can get about entering into the presence of God? If I'm real honest it's a struggle for me. I remember times in college where some friends and I...we'd go up to Linville Gorge in North Carolina, and we'd go...you'd hike down into this gorge and there a river runnin' through it. Beautiful, beautiful area, but we'd get down there, we'd set up camp, and we'd just separate for the whole day. And we'd go, and I remember spending hours upon hours just sitting in the sun on some rock in the middle of a river and just reading my Bible, and praying, and just being quiet, being still, and knowing that God is God. But that's not my normal life. And to tell you the truth, that's not even a desire that I often have when life starts pressing in—when the family needs just start having demands, and I have all the tasks list that I have to check off things that I have to do. I'm not even talking about having time to do that; I'm talking about even having the desire to do that, 'cause it's not a desire. And so I'm convicted, because I realize that oftentimes I'm not earnestly, continually seeking to be with God as Joshua was. And I realize that really, I'm not that worthy of it, of God's presence.

But that's where I ask, and I'm like, 'ok, well what is God's presence? What does this mean?' It's interesting...in Exodus 34, and I'd turn here first, and Exodus 34:5-6...it explains what is meant by God's presence. In fact, when Moses asks to have God reveal Himself to him, when he asks to see His glory, to experience His presence, to see His face, which...presence and face, it's the same sort of word...and when he asks to experience this for God, what does God do? It says that God descended in the cloud, and He stood there with Moses on the mountain. And He proclaimed His name to him.

He proclaimed His name to him. What's the significance of that? We kind of lose the significance of it in a modern, western America where we name someone a name because it sounds good. Ok? Names mean something, especially in this culture. That's why just...names tell you something about the person. That's why we named our third child Alistair. It means "defender of man." It is our prayer that our son will grow up to be a defender of man who will go to the spiritually darkest places of the world to defend man against the lies and deception of the dark one, and turn them to God.

Names mean something. And what does God do? He reveals His name. He proclaims His name, His very character, nature, attributes to Moses, and He lets him experience them. He goes on and he says that God passed before him, and that God proclaimed the name, and He says, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God who is compassionate and gracious, He's slow to anger, He's abounding in lovingkindness and truth.*" He is a God who is so good that we can't comprehend it. Moses could not fully comprehend it, or else he would...or it would cause him to cease to...it would go so far beyond him that he could not handle it. And so God shelters him from that and just lets him see a part of it. And still yet, it is so compassionate and gracious...He is patient, slow to anger, He is abounding in lovingkindness and truth and faithfulness. That's His character; that's who He is.

And it talks about how God used to speak to Moses, in Exodus 33:11, God used to speak to Moses face-to-face as a man talks to his friend. See, here's the thing. Christianity and God's whole plan is not about religion. It's not about doing the 'right things.' It's about a relationship. What matters is He wants a relationship you. He wants a relationship with me. And He has made that possible. And it's a relationship not like you may have with my wife just because I've told you a few odd facts about her a few minutes ago. It's a relationship like I have with her where I understand her. She understands me. Our lives are knit together. And as Sarah, my wife, sometimes says, she can read me like some people read the newspaper. She can tell when I'm getting up here...I don't know, like I get nervous when I get up here. It's...I call it the 'pre-jump jitters'; it's the same sort of nervousness that I would get before I jump out of an airplane, ok? But Sarah can tell, when I get up here, and she can tell when I'm talking, and then she can say, 'Ok, he's settled down, he's fine.' She can just read me. She knows me; and I know her.

God wants that sort of relationship with us, for us to experience His presence in that way—to talk with us, to have a relationship with us as one friend has with another. It's not about having a whole bunch of intellectual facts and knowledge stored up here about God. It's about a relationship that Jesus Christ makes possible—Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

The cool thing is it goes on and at the tail end of Exodus 34 I love this. Moses...he is glowing, literally. Ok? He comes down from the mountain. After he has spent time with God he has experienced God's presence so much, that lovingkindness, that goodness, that compassion, he has experienced all of that so much and it is not just intellectual facts but it is an experiential knowledge that he has had seep into every ounce of his being. So much so that when he comes down he is shining! You have experien... We haven't seen this, ok? When I spend time with God my face does not glow. At the same time, here is a glimpse of what that would be like. And perhaps I've seen this more frequently because I've been working with youth, or around young people, over the last year or two. But have you ever seen, especially when somebody has that young love, you know, they have just that young love that...oooh, they walk like six inches off the ground and they're going along, and especially after they have spent time with this person whom they love, and they are just glowing. Please tell me you know what I'm talking about. It's like...it's just...you can tell, it's just seeping and oozing. Oozing might be a better word here, ok? It's like oozing out of every pore, where you're like, ok, they've just been with this person. They've spent time and they are just, 'Aah, the world is awesome, it's good, I've been with the one whom I love,' and it's just shining forth to brighten up everyone's day, because how could your day not be brighter having just spent time in the presence of this person?

It's the same way with God. And the cool thing is, this is what God wants us to experience. He wants us to experience a relationship with Him that cuts so deep and is infused so much into our lives that when we have spent time in His presence we just shine, and we glow with it. No matter what the circumstance and the situation is, notice that Moses at this time is still in the wilderness. And he never reaches the Promised Land. He sees it with his eyes, but he never realizes it. He really does die in the wilderness with these stiff-necked and obstinate people.

But still yet, he spends time with God, and he...it just shines forth. It oozes out of him. In the same way, God wants a nation of people of His presence who experience His presence in such a real way that it just oozes out, like those people who...that young couple who are in love, and they spend time together, they are just...you can tell they've spent time with one another. That's what God desires for us, in every circumstance and every situation, that we would have that sort of relationship that just fills us up and is more important than anything else in our lives; that we would be a people of His presence.

So what we're going to do is we're going to go ahead and we'll just close on this note—the simple fact that we are challenged to be a people of God's presence. And I would just challenge you to wrestle with those three questions. And maybe some others hit you here, but I look at it and these three questions. The first—do I desire God's blessings or His presence? If I'm not experiencing this, and I'll tell you, if you're not experiencing this probably the reason is, is because one of these three questions is out of whack. You desire blessings rather than His presence, or there are idols. Am I desiring...am I willing to give up my idols or His presence? Maybe there's an idol in your life. Or the third—are you earnestly seeking, desiring, to spend time with Him? I challenge you to wrestle with those. But please stand. And we'll sing this prayer, praying that in whatever circumstance, whatever situation, that we will spend time with God, and that time that we have spent time in His presence will just exude from us, will ooze out of every pore, no matter what circumstance or situation we find ourselves in. But join with me.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

I pray that you'll go in His grace and experience His presence. Have a good day.