

The Presence of God

by David Ravenhill

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing and experiencing God's presence, rather than just focusing on parts of God's nature or promises.

Duration: 29:25

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:7

Topics: "Gods Presence", "Spiritual Intimacy"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking and valuing the presence of God above all else, highlighting the danger of focusing on parts of faith rather than the whole relationship with God. It uses the stories of Moses and the Israelites, as well as the longing of great men like Paul and David, to illustrate the necessity of God's presence in our lives.

Transcript

It's a joy to be with you this morning. As I tell people as I travel around the world that it's always good to meet the rest of the family. And I'm your brother whether you like it or not.

And your brothers and sisters are mine and I can't do anything about that either. But we're all redeemed by the same blood, all part of the same family, all going to that one great eternal abode in the presence of God. Let's just look to the Lord in prayer shall we.

Father we just confess again our need of you. Lord unless you build a house we labor in vain. And so Lord come and do what you promised to do.

You said I will build my church. Lord we recognize this is your church. We recognize your leadership, your headship, your lordship.

Father we bow again in submission to you today. Lord have your way we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

I want to speak to you this morning on the presence of God. My wife and I had the privilege of raising our family in the city of Christchurch New Zealand. And if you are familiar with that city you know that it is built around a wonderful old Anglican Cathedral.

And not too many blocks away there is a museum called the Canterbury Museum. And as you go into the entrance of that museum there is a verse of scripture taken from the book of Job, Job chapter 26 verse 14.

And it says this, lo these are a part of his ways but how little a portion do we hear of him.

Lo these are a part of his ways but how little a portion do we hear of him. I've spent many hours in that museum when our children were younger. We now have grandchildren.

But going down the various corridors looking at all the display cabinets admiring all of God's creation. I've seen children grab the hand of a parent and point to some animal a bird or reptile and say what's that or where does this come from and so on. And yet in all the hours that I've spent in that museum I don't ever remember anybody attributing all of that handiwork to God himself.

And so that verse is a fitting verse. These are a part of his ways but how little a portion is heard of him. And while that may be a good verse for a museum it is a tragic verse to put over the house of God.

And yet I think we could write it over many congregations. I'm not sure about Singapore but I know in America we could write it over dozens and dozens of congregations. These are simply a part of his ways but how little a portion we hear of him.

I was given a book a number of years ago by my father. A book by one of my favorite authors Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones in the preface of that book on the Sermon on the Mount. He makes a statement that I have told Bible school students is worth at least one semester.

In most Bible schools and seminaries that normally gets their attention. And the statement is simply this. There is nothing so likely to lead to error or heresy as to begin with the parts rather than the whole.

Let me say that again. There is nothing so likely to lead to error or to heresy as to begin with the parts rather than the whole. There is incredible insight and wisdom behind that statement.

Years and years of experience as that man was one of the great writers, great teachers, expositors of our day. I was in India back in 1986 I think we were living in New Zealand at the time and I was ministering there just for a week. A friend of mine was in charge of a Bible school and invited me to come over and speak.

And there in the compound of the school there was a brand new Jeep belonged to the director and I was trying to get across the importance of that statement to those students. That again there is nothing likely to lead to error or heresy as to begin with the parts rather than the whole. And I said if I came to the school and using the Jeep as an illustration I said suppose as a visiting lecturer I spent the entire year speaking about the carburetor on that Jeep.

And I talk about all the different types of carburetors you know single barrel, two barrel, four barrel, six barrel if you're into drag racing. I talk about the evolution of the carburetor into fuel injection. An hour after hour after hour, day after day after day, week after week after week, month after month.

All I do is stress the importance of the carburetor. At the end of that year you have a graduating class and they spread out all over India and they establish the carburetor movement. A group of churches that emphasize carburetor theology.

The following year there's another guest speaker. He comes he's got a revelation on another part of the engine let's say the distributor. And like the carburetor man he talks about the importance of the distributor, what it does, the components that make up the distributor.

He gives you the Greek word for distributor and the Hebrew word for distributor. He gives you books to read about the great distributor developers and so on. There's exams and tests about distributors and so on.

At the end of the year once again these students have been steeped in distributor theology and now all over India there's a brand new movement called the distributor churches. Following year there's a guest speaker. Takes out of his pocket a little gadget about three and a half inches long four inches and it's white at the top black at the bottom.

And he begins his class by saying I want to tell you the most important part of a car engine is this little thing here. Without this it's impossible to please God I mean start the car. And he talks about the importance of the carburetor.

Sorry about the spark plug. And hour after hour after hour all they hear about is this little spark plug. He says you can have a brand new Ferrari.

That thing may cost you a million Singapore dollars or more. It's capable of doing 200 plus miles an hour. It's got Connelly leather seats and so on and so forth.

Pirelli tires and you know Bose stereo system that will blow you from here to Indonesia. And but he says if you take out that little plug that car will not even move. So I'm here to tell you the most important part of a car engine is this.

And of course they are absolutely convinced they've never heard of a carburetor. Never heard of a distributor. Never heard of a block of the pistons or anything else.

And this man convinces them because of his eloquence that this is the most important thing. Again at the end of the year you have a graduating class now and you have the spark plug movement all over India. And of course spark plug churches gather together and they have spark plug conferences.

And they call in their spark plug speakers and they perpetuate the spark plug theology. Meantime across town there is a carburetor conference going on and next month is going to be a distributor conference going on and never the twain shall meet. I know that's rather humorous but tragically it's true.

You see in America at least we have movements. We have an entire movement devoted to faith. Another movement devoted to prosperity.

Another movement signs and wonders. Another movement holiness. Another movement evangelism.

Another movement into inner healing or whatever it may be. And there is nothing so likely to lead to error or heresy as to begin with the parts rather than the whole. If you put all those parts together you have a person.

His name is Lord Jesus Christ. He said I am the way not a part of the truth. I am the truth.

And as I've studied the lives of great men and women of God over the years I've come to this conclusion. They all had one common denominator and that was an insatiable longing for the presence of God. That was one thing you see it in the life of Paul that I may know him not just about it.

Paul had his theology down pat. He's still confusing people as to what he really meant on certain things and so on. But he didn't say I know what I believe.

Obviously he did. He said I know in whom I have believed. It was a relationship.

It was Paul's passion to know him not just know about him not have all this theology or eschatology and so on figured out. But he wanted to know again that intimacy with God that longing that desire. Writing to the Colossians he says that he might have preeminence in all things.

It's not faith. It's not prosperity. It's not some facet of truth.

It is the truth that is to have the place of supremacy. The place of centrality in our Christian life. And you go to all of these great men in the Word of God and again that is their longing.

Jeremiah says if you're going to boast about anything don't boast about your prosperity. Your riches. Don't boast about your wisdom or your intellect and so on.

Don't boast about your strength your ability to shred phone books. But he says boast in this that you know and you understand me saith the Lord. That's what it's all about isn't it.

It's not about human strength. It's not about our mind and our education and so on. Those may be good things but ultimately it's about how do I know him.

How much do I know him. We see men like David who time after time throughout the Word of God expresses his longing for the presence of God. Who have I in heaven but thee.

And there is nothing on earth I desire beside thee. I still think that's one of the most challenging verses. I've been stuck on it for many many years.

It's very easy to agree with the first part of the verse. Who have I in heaven but thee. I have a father there mother a few relatives and friends and so on.

But basically it's easy just to say who have I in heaven but thee. The second part of the verse is a challenging part. And there is nothing on earth I desire beside thee.

David as a king looked over that vast kingdom. He had the power the position to have whatever he wanted. And you and I again face that every single day.

There are billboards screaming at us if you don't drive this sort of car live in this sort of a house where these sort of clothes have this sort of watch or whatever it is and so on and so forth. You know you're not going to be satisfied. And David was able to bypass all of that.

And he says I can look past every single billboard in the country. Because he says there's nothing on earth that I desire beside thee. What a statement.

Who have I in heaven but thee. He says. And there in the Psalms over and over and over again David expresses that long as the deer pants for the water brook.

So longs my soul for thee. I was with a wonderful man of God some years ago. And we were ministering together up in the northwest in America.

And he touched on that Psalm and I have still not forgotten what he said. He said the only reason the deer is panting is because the deer is being pursued. He said David as a shepherd boy would sit on a rock and in the early hours of the morning the deer would saunter by down into the valley drink their fill disappear into the forest or thicket somewhere.

And this would be a sort of routine. But he says on this occasion David is sitting there and suddenly the deer comes flying by. And he can hear the heaving and the panting of that deer as it's being pursued and chased by maybe a mountain lion or something.

And he says that deer knows instinctively there's only one place of protection and that's to find its way into the water brook because there in the water brook it can shake off the scent or its scent and the predator cannot pick up the trail. And so he says the water brook becomes a place of protection. But he says not only that he says the water brook becomes a place of satisfaction because there in the water brook he can replenish that thirsty tired exhausted weary body and drinking that cool life-giving water.

And he says I believe David wrote this when he was being pursued by Saul. And Saul has made threats on his life and David is running fleeing. And David knows there's only one place of protection to come under the shadow of the Almighty.

That's the only place. But he says it's a place of protection in the presence of God. But not only that a place of satisfaction because the river of God is full of water.

And there we can drink in again the Spirit of God and find refreshment. And David again goes on and on and on about this longing that he has just a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of wickedness and so on.

If you have your Bible this morning turn with me to the book of Exodus. Exodus chapter 32. And here we find another man who has this longing for the presence of God.

His name is Moses. And we find him in this chapter in the presence of God. God has summons him to come up the mountain.

And there he is in the presence of God. God has been speaking to him. In the meantime the children of Israel have become restless.

Moses has been gone for many many weeks. And they go to Aaron Moses's brother. And they said listen we don't know what's happened to Moses.

He's obviously died. We need a God that will go before us. We need new leadership and so on.

You know the story how Aaron bows to the pressure. Gathers together all the jewelry from the ladies. Throws it into the fire and out popped the golden calf.

At least that was his explanation. Wasn't quite that simple but it's amazing what we say when we're backed into a corner isn't it? He said you know it wasn't my fault. I just you know it just sort of happened.

And around that golden calf there really is nothing less than a sexual orgy that is going on. The people are out of control. The worshipping as the nations round about them worshipped.

And most of their gods were fertility gods. In those days still are in many of our nations. And so much of their worship again was unclean.

It was based it was essential in its nature. And God is angry with what he sees. Not only is it because of the immorality and not only the idolatry that is going on.

But they've done something that is possibly the most serious thing of all. And that is they touch the glory of God. Because it says there they've attributed all of the great acts of God.

To this creation of their own hands. Notice it says in verse 8. They quickly turn aside from the way which I commanded them. They made for themselves a molten calf.

They've worshipped it. Sacrificed to it and says this is your God. Oh Israel who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

In other words this creation is what delivered you. This is the one that turned the Nile to blood. This is the one that brought lice and you know plagues of frogs and so on and so forth.

This is one that ultimately slew the firstborn. This is one that parted the Red Sea. This is one that is responsible.

And one of the most dangerous things that you and I can do is touch the glory of God. God will share everything with us apart from his glory. He'll give us his love his patience his kindness his righteousness and so on.

But my glory I will not share with any man. And they were taking again the glory of God. Robbing God of his glory.

That along with the immorality and idolatry. We find God as angry I think as you ever see him in the word of God. And he says there in verse 10 leave me alone Moses.

That my anger may burn against them that I may destroy them and I will make of you a great nation. Moses here has the opportunity of replacing Abraham. Isaac and Jacob if you've ever studied this portion this is a most amazing situation that here Moses literally can take the place of Abraham.

Abraham would have been forgotten. God would have established a new nation. The father of that nation would have been Moses.

And he would have gone down through the years as the leader of the nation of Israel. The most important man if you like. And yet in the pressure of that situation Moses does not bow.

He is a shepherd. He is interested in seeing his people again forgiven. And he begins to pray.

We pick up his prayer in verse 13. He says to God remember Abraham and Isaac and Israel your servants to whom you did swear by yourself. You said to them I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven.

All this land that I've spoken I will give to your seed and they shall inherit it forever. And so on the basis of covenant we find that Moses begins to intercede. And basically what he says is this God listen we have contracts.

If we were to use today's terminology we could say God we have a contract here. A contract that you made with Abraham and Isaac and with Abraham Isaac and Jacob. And it's got your signature on it.

See right here. You can't back out of this. You can't renege on your promise.

We can take you to court if you like. You know we've got your name on these contracts. After all God you're supposed to be the great promise keeper.

You're supposed to be the one that says that I never change. With me there's no variable. There's no shadow of turning.

You're the one that says I am the Lord and I change not. You're the one that says all the promises are yea and amen in Christ. You're the one that says my word is more important than my very name.

God you cannot do what you said you would do. And if you do we'll never trust you again. If you break your promise.

If you renege on these promises. How will we ever know if you mean it from now on. If you're going to be fickle like that and change your mind.

These are covenants. These are promises we've held on to for 400 years in bondage. That God was going to keep his word.

And now if you change it we will never know again if your word is reliable from this day on. And so that basically that's his argument. And God says you got me.

Verse 14 the Lord changed his mind about the evil that he said he would do to his people. We now go to the next chapter and it is now God's turn to remind Moses that he is a covenant keeping God. Moses reminds God of his covenant.

Now God reminds Moses of his covenant. Verse 1 and the Lord spoke to Moses saying depart from here you and the people who you brought out from the land of Egypt to the land which I swore to Abraham Isaac and Jacob saying to your descendants I will give it. I'll send an angel before you drive out the Canaanite the Amorite the Hittite and so on.

So it's now time for the children of Israel to advance towards their goal of going into the promised land. This was a dream again that they had nurtured over the years. This was the thing that kept them going.

If you like this was the carrot at the end of the stick that sort of kept the donkey moving ahead so to speak through all the years of bondage and servitude and so on. It was this promise that one day we're going to be free. One day we'll have our own land.

A land that flows with milk and honey. And God says to Moses this is the day I want you to begin to advance towards that goal. And I can imagine a ripple going through the camp as they heard as they began to pack up their possessions and got ready to begin to advance towards the promised land.

The excitement of that. Again we have a description of what the land was like. It says in verse 3 it was a land flowing with milk and honey.

It wasn't literally of course flowing with milk and honey. They were not wading across rivers of milk and you know trying to walk through knee deep honey and so on. But that was descriptive of God's abundance God's blessing.

Deuteronomy chapter 6 I think it is you have God describing what the land is like there. Let me read a little bit of that to you. Verse 10 it shall come about when the Lord your God brings you into the land which you swore to your fathers to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to give you great and splendid cities which you did not build.

That was a very important PS. By the way you don't have to build these ones. I can imagine when they heard listen I'm going to give you great and splendid cities there was a sigh that went up.

Listen I couldn't build another city if you paid me. You know because their entire life had been one of servitude of building cities for Pharaoh. In fact the psalmist says I've relieved your shoulder of the burden.

The margin says literally I've taken the brick load off your shoulder. This was a nation bowed down from the moment you could work as a little child again as a slave. You had to carry bricks and they were just bowed down.

Again he's my glory and the lifter of my head. They were a nation stooped down weighed down with anxiety and fears and so on and so forth. And God says I'm going to give you great and splendid cities.

God is no man's debtor. God keeps the books and he says I'm going to give back to you all those cities that you built. I'm going to give you great and splendid cities and you don't have to build them.

Then he says houses full of good things which you did not fill. In other words not all derelict houses that need a lot of refurbishing and all the material inside needs to be thrown away and you've got to start all over again. No these are houses loaded with good things.

He says shun cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant. What an incredible promise. This again was the dream what we would say in America the American dream.

I'm sure you have that same dream the Singaporean dream of having your own little house somewhere or apartment or whatever all paid for you know. In this case it was a little better. They went all sort of next door to each other.

You had a little bit of land houses and you know vineyards and olive trees. You you weren't all squished up against each other. You had your own water supply in the backyard.

You know you didn't need to have desalinization processes and so on. You had a well there and abundance of clean water and so on all of that. I mean this was an incredible promise that God had given to the children of Israel.

Then God drops a bombshell. He says by the way Moses as you go in you're going in without my presence. I will not go with you.

Notice there in verse 3. Go up to a land that flows with milk and honey for I will not go up in your midst because you are a stubborn people or an obstinate people lest I destroy you on the way. Moses now is faced with a dilemma. What do I do? Do I go in to the presence of God or do I stay? He had two choices.

We've described one of those choices already. Again houses and lands and vineyards and olive trees. Great splendid cities.

Everything that in the natural man would love to have but no presence of God. Now if you had to make a decision this morning what would your choice be? If you were faced with a situation that Moses is faced with. Do I go in and take the children of Israel in? This is the thing that has kept them going over those 400 years of bondage.

You say well that's very carnal. That's very materialistic. Houses, lands and vineyards.

Well let me sweeten the deal a little bit. I'll send an angel before you. Not a demon.

An angel. An angel that will do signs, wonders and miracles. Things that you're incapable of doing.

When you run into a rough patch all you've got to do is call on the angel. He'll drive out the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite and so on. He'll do all these signs, wonders and miracles but still not have the presence of God.

That's choice number one. Choice number two is to stay where you are. Let me describe where you are.

The Bible calls it a waste howling wilderness. A place of intense heat by day, freezing temperatures at night. The sun will not smite thee by day nor the moon by night.

Again the temperatures would plummet. It was a place of scorpions the Bible says. It was just the most desolate place.

There were no cities. There was no vegetation. There was no possibility of looking after yourself apart from the supernatural supply of manna.

It was not exactly the American dream or the Singaporean dream. Again just a waste howling wilderness. Moses of course had an advantage that the children of Israel didn't have as he is faced with this decision.

You see Moses was raised the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses grew up in the finest home in all of Egypt, the equivalent in America of the White House. He had the finest education.

He didn't go to school. The teachers came to him. He rode around in the latest model chariot.

He had all the finest clothes of Egypt. After all he was a king's kid. He was a kid that had incredible privilege.

He had everything going for him. Everything that money could buy. Money was no option.

After all he was royalty possibly being groomed to be one of the pharaohs. And yet the day came when the Bible says that it didn't satisfy us. We've heard so often there was a God shaped blank if you like in the heart of Moses.

The Bible says that Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than all the treasures and pleasures of Egypt. And he turned his back on that and as we have the saying in America, I've been there and done that. He knew that no house, no vineyard, no olive tree, none of those things could satisfy.

There's only one form of satisfaction. It's the presence of God. And so he does what Moses does so well.

He begins to pray and he says now in verse 13, Now therefore I pray thee if I found favor in your sight let me know your ways that I may know thee so that I may find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is thy people. Now notice his prayer is not one of compromise but he says let me know you that I may know your ways or let me know your ways that I may know you.

What a strange prayer don't you think? I say a strange prayer given the circumstances because my prayer would have been totally different. I have to be honest if I was Moses I'd have said to God something like this, God let's reason together. After all you're the one that suggested it.

Come let's reason together so I'm going to take you up on your offer. You know let's talk man to man, face to face, let's be real. God there's a part of me that loves houses and lands and vineyards and all the you know normal natural things but there's a part of me that wants your presence as well so why don't we have some sort of compromise here.

Oh I know we get on your nerves. You know you're still upset. Boy you said you were so mad the other day and I know we sometimes say things we get emotional and afterwards we regret because you know we just said too much in the heat of the moment but now that you've had time to settle down and so on let's you know.

I mean you accused us of being stubborn and God I say this reverently I think you've been a little stubborn yourself here. I mean that would have been my argument. Lord as some sort of compromise it would be nice if you if you came every once in a while.

I know we get on your nerves you know don't you don't need to hang around us all night. In fact the fact is God I'll tell you a secret and I know you know secrets anyway but we get along pretty well without you most of the week. Oh we've got our degrees and you know we're educated and so on but you know we need you in times of crisis.

You're a present help in time of trouble but you know the rest of the time I get by with my degree you know. I mean that would have been my argument. God let's compromise.

I mean why don't you come up you know and see us every once in a while. The great feast days it'd be nice if you came there. Moses doesn't mention houses, lands, and vineyards.

All he says is God I want to know you. Teach me your ways Lord that I may know you. And as the Bible says deep calls unto deep and God responds and he says to Moses my presence will go with you and I will give you rest.

And Moses said how can it be known and I think this is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. How can it be known that I found favor in your side I and thy people? Is it not by thy going with us so that we I and thy people may be distinguished from all the other people who are on the face of the earth? Moses said there's only one thing that distinguishes us. It's not our long sideburns.

It's not our kosher diet. It's not even our ten commandments. Not even our feast days.

It's not even our tabernacle. The only thing that makes us unique is the fact that your presence dwells in our midst. And if your presence doesn't go we just end up with a form of godliness.

But there's no power. And I'm sure in Moses mind he was thinking the nations ran about. They had their temples.

They had their priests. They had their sacrifices. They had their holy days.

They had their songs and rituals and so on that they went through. But he says listen we have the presence of God and they don't. And if you take away your presence from us Lord we're no different.

We may dress differently. We may eat a different diet. We may do this and that.

But we're really no different. The only thing that distinguishes us. The only thing that sets us apart is your presence.

Lord we can't live without your presence. Turn with me to Song of Solomon. You see we've been looking at men this morning that have this craving, this longing for the presence of God.

But it takes two to have a relationship. Isn't that right? I understand you guys have a lot of weddings here and I was privileged to go to one last night. What a wonderful affair that was.

But I can imagine in a congregation of this size there's a young man who already has his eye on some young lady. And every time he sees

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