

# The Difference: God's Presence

By Brandon Bernard

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Exodus 33:1-17  
**Preached on:** Sunday, January 27, 2019

## Westminster Presbyterian Church

3701 Jones Creek  
Baton Rouge, LA 70816

**Website:** [www.wpcbr.org](http://www.wpcbr.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/wpcbr](http://www.sermonaudio.com/wpcbr)

I invite you this morning to turn in your Bibles to the book of Exodus 33. Exodus 33 as we consider this morning Exodus 33:1-17.

People of God, this is the word of our God. Exodus 33, beginning with verse 1.

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' 2 "And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. 3 "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." 4 And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. 5 For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.'" 6 So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb. 7 Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. 8 So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. 9 And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. 10 All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. 11 So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle. 12 Then 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. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.' 13

"Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people." 14 And He said, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 Then he said to Him, "If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. 16 "For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth." 17 So the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name."

Thus ends the reading of God's word from Exodus 33:1-17.

Let us pray to the Lord now.

*Our Father, we dare not approach Your word this morning on our own strength thinking that we can comprehend it and have it applied to our souls as it ought apart from Your Spirit. Lord, we come humbled as we approach Your word this morning and we acknowledge our full and complete dependence upon Your Spirit to illumine our hearts to this text and apply it to each of our souls and to strengthen our faith, for if You strengthen our faith, it shall be strengthened. We look to You now in faith for it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Much of the Old Testament Scriptures is taken up with these two things: a people and a land. God had chosen a people unto himself, the nation of Israel, and he had promised his people that they would inherit the land that he had given to them. We find the people of Israel having escaped Egypt by God's power and Moses is high up on the mountain of Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai, receiving a word from the Lord. God is actually communicating to Moses in that very time upon top of the mountain that God would, indeed, provide for his people his presence so that they would, indeed, reach the Promised Land and God would dwell among them on the way and God would dwell with them once they arrived there, and here comes Moses down the mountain and he hears a stir at the bottom. He hears a sound much like a party, but he has it revealed to him that the people are engaged in a great sin against the Lord their God who has redeemed them from Egypt, and now there is seemingly a question mark on whether these people who are God's will even inherit the land that God had promised them.

Well, we find in our text this morning that God is having the people move forward toward that land he had promised them. We find in verse 1 this morning of chapter 33 those two little words, "Go up." God says, "Go up. Go up to the land." Now we don't want to pass by this short statement too fast without recognizing its glorious significance. Earlier in chapter 32, this sin that was going on at the base of the mountain was referred to as a great sin which is actually a technical phrase. In the Ancient Near East in legal documents, we find this phrase "great sin" as a reference to an unfaithful spouse. So we

have the characterization of this activity at the base of the mountain as ultimately an unfaithful people to God with whom they are in marriage. They are found to be this unfaithful people and that's the reason why in verse 1 you may have noticed it when I read it at first, that God did not reference his people as "My people." He speaks to Moses and says to Moses, "The people whom you, Moses, brought out of the land of Egypt." Do you see God disassociating himself in a certain way? He had said way back when God's people were in Egypt, what was it that the word that went to Pharaoh? "Pharaoh, Pharaoh, let My people go, and that's the basis upon which you should release them. They're Mine." But here we seem to have a shift where the people are not referred to as "My people," they're not referred to as "My treasured possession," but rather they are just simply "the people." There's a big difference in saying "the wife" and saying "my wife." There's a big difference in saying "the children" and "My children," isn't there?

So appropriately the people are referred to as a stiff-necked people. This is language that comes from the farmer's experience where the farmer would find an animal, perhaps an ox that he would place a yoke upon this ox like a large instrument by which they could use to the ox to plow the fields, for instance, but the animal would be found to be obstinate, he'd be found to be a very difficult animal. When the reins would move to the right or move to the left, he would stiffen up his neck, "No, I'm not going that way." Stubborn is a good word for it, a stubborn animal, and here like this farm animal, the people of God are being characterized by God as just that, a stiff-necked, stubborn people.

God's people would not wear the yoke of obedience to God. They would not have it and the result was just this horrible disaster at the base of the mountain, this great sin of unfaithfulness, yet amid all of this unfaithfulness and this is why we don't want to run past these two words, "go up," too quickly, amid their unfaithfulness as a spouse unto God, what does God still say? "Go up. I'm gonna keep My promise to you. You're gonna get into the land that I have promised you." He says in verse 1 and 2 here, "go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it. And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey.'" Go up. Do you see the contrast? Though Israel is found to be this most unfaithful wife, God is found to be most faithful and committed to his promises, not failing in a one to his people.

He had spoken the word of promise and he will keep it even when this stubborn stiff-necked people are unfaithful and found to not be committed in obedience to God. Are you and I thankful that God is this type of God? A God that is one that we need to constantly be reminded of as a faithful one, because we don't have to look far into our own hearts to find, what? We who are the bride, great unfaithfulness. We can't even trust our own hearts. We constantly find our hearts wanting and lacking for faithfulness to our great God who has brought us out of Egypt's bondage and yet he remains faithful. Our hearts are prone to sin and yet God's grace is greater than our sin. Our everyday commitments quickly turns to denial like the Apostle Peter. So quickly and yet he is

committed to his word and keeping his promises. Yea, even we who are found faithless, he is ever found faithful and he has a great reputation at being faithful to his people.

But as this text progresses, we find that there is actually something that is far more disastrous than the idolatry and unfaithfulness of these people. We find in verse 3, if you'll look with me at chapter 33, verse 3, he says, "for," or "but" might be another word to use here, "I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." Verse 5, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'" You know, just a cursory reading through the book of Exodus, you find one thing that's accented is the holy presence of God. You find that starting with God meeting with Moses in the burning bush, "Take off the sandals of your feet, you're standing on holy ground." That's how God introduces himself to Moses, and then all the way until all of the pieces of furniture in the tabernacle and the tabernacle itself speaks to the holiness of God. No one can even enter the far chamber of the tabernacle except one man, the high priest. "Holy, holy, holy, is He." We find that again and again.

You see, a sinful people and a holy God cannot coexist. That's what's being shouted from the rooftops throughout Exodus. The two cannot coexist together. God says, "I will not go up among you. I'll consume you, you stiff-necked people, you sinful, unfaithful bride of mine." In this text we actually find God seeking the good of his people because he knows that he cannot go up with his people through the wilderness side by side else he would, indeed, consume them. In fact, you notice the language, "In a moment, I'll consume you. It won't take much time." He's hot with anger in his holiness.

So this journey God is going to send his people on, and here it is, it will not include God. He sends them on the journey and says, "Go up, but I'm not going with you." As one author put it, the people were booked for the Promised Land but God canceled his reservations for himself. You know, it was this idolatry at the base of the mountain was a disaster. Even looking back at Egypt and the slavery for all those hundreds of years, disastrous. We think our 9/11 is a disaster. We think Katrina was a disaster. We use that kind of language when we reference things of that nature. But nothing compared to this moment in the life of Israel. We need to pause and really take in the gravity of this moment. Brothers and sisters, the whole reason that God took them out of Egypt is that he might dwell with them, that he might be their God and they his people. The whole purpose of these hundreds of years in slavery and yet God showing the wonders of his work in redeeming them. The whole purpose of the slain lamb and the blood on the doorposts, the whole purpose of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea was for one purpose, that God would dwell with his people and now God is declaring that he will send his people on their way and give them success but his presence will not go with them.

What a disaster. I wonder how the people will respond? The Scripture tells us in verse 4, "And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments," for the Lord had spoken. Verse 6, "So the children of Israel stripped

themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb." How did the people receive this word? They mourned. It's bad news. Technically the word there "bad" is the word, our English phrase "disastrous." Not just simply, "Eh, that's not so hot." No, disaster. Horrible news. News that makes you quiver. And they mourned.

There's an implicit challenge here to the people of Israel. It's important you note what's going on here and how Yahweh is interacting with his people. God is guaranteeing them blessing, he's guaranteeing them success. In fact, he says, "My Angel will go with you. My Angel will make dead certain that the Hittites, the Jebusites and all the 'ites' will be wiped out before you and you will enter the Promised Land. The Angel will assure that that will take place." God's promise of blessing still stands but this blessing would be without the intimate relationship and fellowship of God himself. There is an inherent challenge, really, that God is putting before the hearts of his people. Will they consider receiving the blessing without the relationship? Would they receive the blessing without the intimacy of fellowship with God as satisfactory? Or would they know of their utter need of relationship with God and his presence as something that's absolutely necessary? But they do see it as it ought to be seen. We find that they respond with hearts that long for God's presence. The lack thereof is an utter disaster, a disaster of disasters. This is not worthy of just saying, "Aw shucks. I wish it could be otherwise. We'll miss You, God. We're going to go on the way and enjoy the blessing and enjoy the success. You take care, Yahweh. We'll move on our way just as You commanded."

It's an interesting little challenge that's being placed here before his people but, no, they see it as a real disaster. It's not a light thing. Could we even say it's the only real true disaster, the lack of God's presence? Would you consider that the greatest of all disasters, God's favorable presence? The whole Bible is concerned with the subject of God's presence being restored to his people and we find here that the people start taking their ornaments off, their jewelry. Most scholars see these ornaments or jewelry as related to idolatry. We find the same with Jacob way back in Genesis where they take off the ornaments. There's some sense in which they are symbolic of their idolatry and unfaithfulness. So they remove their ornaments, rejecting their pagan gods and rejecting their unfaithful hearts to God. In fact, you notice the Scripture says they didn't just take them off, God said, "Take them off," and what did they do? They stripped them off. There's actually some strong language here. They're just yanking them off, don't want to have anything to do with them. You see that heart of repentance that's coming out in their lives. As one author put it, when the Holy Spirit convicts us of any sin, we need to take it off, whatever is leading us into sin, and never put it on again. That's what they're committing themselves to. They strip it off never to put it on again.

The people aren't just feeling sorry for themselves, there is a deep heart repentance. God's presence is everything to them. "We're not a people without You." Even if they made it to the Promised Land, without God's presence they had lost the only thing that had really mattered. Let me say that again: even if they made it to the Promised Land, without the presence of God they had lost the only thing that really mattered, the presence of God. The only blessing pursued is God himself, not just the benefit and the blessing that one can receive from him. His presence is what made the difference. "We're nothing without

You, God. We have no comfort without You. We have no confidence without You. We have no purpose without You."

I wonder if this would be a disastrous word to us? I wonder if our response would be similar to the people, having a sense of the weightiness of God, the weightiness of his promises, the weightiness and necessity of his presence? I wonder if you and I would go ahead and move on? You know, it's easy around the New Year as you get involved in all types of resolutions and all types of new schedules and new commitments etc., just moving right along. The worst news would be leaving God behind, wouldn't it? Moving along without his presence or seeing it as important? Do we find our hearts – watch it now – wishing for the blessing apart from relationship with God? Wanting the success but not an intimate relationship with him?

How often do we find that in our own hearts? Did you know that that really as far as on a large scale is concerned, is precisely what defines the world's thinking? I mean, that is it, isn't it? "I want all of what you Christians claim that is yours but I just don't want God. I want heaven," right? "I want eternal bliss. I want the comfort of knowing I'm protected and that all the details of my life are being worked out for my good. I want to know that the Creator is looking out for me and taking care of me and will always provide for me, and in fact, I'll take the eternal bliss even if He's not there." That's the thinking of the world, is it not? "I want the success. I want the blessing. I want the result." But it's not in keeping with any interest in an intimate loving relationship with God whose presence means everything.

What benefit is there in the accumulation of things and wealth without God? Or job promotions? Or decrees? Or accomplishments? What does it really matter if they're without God? What if we move on without God? In a marriage, what does it matter if you and your spouse enjoy all kinds of experiences together if it's without God's presence at the center? Does his presence mean that much? Is it that significant? This bears a manifold application in our lives. I wonder what our response would be to a disastrous word such as this, "I will not go with you"?

Well, what will the people do? We find a glimmer of hope in verses 7 to 11 where we find that Moses has this great privilege of speaking to God face-to-face. He goes into the tent of meeting and the Scripture says that, language like you don't see anywhere else in the Bible, he speaks face-to-face with God as a man does with his dear friend. That's intimacy. That's access and Moses had it. Moses knew the presence of God and he had access to him. Moses has interceded on behalf of Israel in the past and here we're gonna find him interceding again on behalf of the people who've sinned against God and are found unfaithful. Wow.

Inside that tent where Moses and God will speak face-to-face, everything hangs in the balance regarding this unfaithful people, them being his people and entering the Promised Land and God going with them. There were as one author put it, high level negotiations going on inside that tent. Wouldn't it be great to listen in? To listen in to the conversation that Moses is having as he seeks to intercede for the people with God? Well, we have that

privilege. Did you know that? The text of holy Scripture let's us inside the tent and to listen to the negotiation.

It begins in verse 12, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me." He implies here along with the remainder of this conversation, that God has not really made it clear who will lead the people other than this angel, and yet Moses continues to make quite clear whose presence he wants and knows is required, which is God's. It's evident, you see, that God's presence has been manifest to Moses. Only Moses speaks to God face-to-face in the tent of meeting, just like he spoke face-to-face with God on top of the mount. That's why there's a direct correlation between that mountain and that tabernacle.

But what about the people, do they have this type of relationship? What's gonna happen with them? They don't speak to God as one speaks with a friend. Well, God answers in verse 14 and he says, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Now, on a cursory reading of that verse, you might say this, "Wow, Moses got a satisfactory answer, didn't he? God's gonna go with them after all. End of conversation. End of negotiation, if you will." No. Notice that God uses the singular here. He says, "I will go with you, Moses. I'll go with you and I will give you, Moses, rest." God's only promising something to Moses here.

The conversation is not ended but the mediator is relentless. He's relentless. You see Moses as mediator. What's the whole purpose of this meeting? Is it to intercede on behalf of himself and God? No, his whole purpose as mediator and intercessor is to intercede for the people. He recognizes his role. He's here to plead the cause of the people of God, "Your people," he reminds God, "Your people whom You brought out of the land of Egypt." You hear him speaking and arguing his case. He's interested in their benefit so he speaks as though "I and the people" are one package. You may not have noticed that on the first reading.

Look at verse 15 and 16 again. It says, "If Your Presence does not go with us," listen to that, "do not bring us up from here." See, he's responding to God saying, "Just you, Moses." Verse 16, "For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth." You see how he's a package deal. "Lord, the way that I want You to deal with me, seeing me face-to-face, I want You to deal with them the same way. We're one people. Let it be done to them what You're gonna do to me. If You're promising me success in the Promised Land, that Your presence will go with me, I want Your presence to go with them." The whole role here is to mediate on their behalf. Do you hear Moses' choice words, "Your people. Consider this nation Your people." This is in contradistinction to God who just said, "the people, Your people."

So therefore on behalf of the people Moses pleads only for God's presence. "It's not good enough that You go with me, Yahweh. We'll not have it if You don't go with us. We're nothing and have nothing besides You. After all, these are Your people. I didn't choose

them, You chose them. I didn't bring them out of Egypt, You're the one that brought them out of Egypt. It's not I who promised them a land, it's Yours, You're the one that promised them."

So he's interceding, pleading for God's presence with his people and God gives a favorable response to Moses, the intercessor. Look at verse 17. He writes in verse 17, "the LORD said to Moses, 'I will also do this thing that you have spoken.'" I'll do it. You and the people, okay. But why? That's the question on the table in this text. Why? Why will God do this? What will instigate God to respond so favorably to this request of this mediator? Why is God moved to compassion now for this "the people"? Had God suddenly found some good in these people after all? Had God found that, "You know, I've made a mistake. The people are not really all that stiff-necked after all. And you know that disastrous thing at the bottom of the mountain? Maybe I deal with it a little bit too severe." Had God reconsidered saying, "You know, the people aren't that bad after all, and after all, I'm willing to bend My holiness. I'm not that holy after all." Is that why the Lord responds in this way to Moses? No. There's only one reason. Look at verse 17, it's glorious. If you underscore your Bibles, this is one of those phrases to underscore and to highlight five times, "for you have found," favor or "grace in My sight, and I know you," Moses, "by name. My presence is gonna go with the people and I'm going to show them favor not because they deserved it, not because I'm willing to bend My holiness, not because the people are righteous in some way, not because the people have anything to offer me, but I will go with the people because of their mediator, the one in the tent that's talking to Me face-to-face as a friend. I'm gonna go with them for your sake, mediator, because, Moses, you have found favor in My sight and I know you by name. I know you intimately and on you have I placed My favor." Wow.

If you need a lesson on mediation, what is it for Christ to be a mediator? This is the best illustration you can find in holy Scripture: God's gonna show mercy and show favor to the people for one reason and it's the Mediator whom he loved so much. Dear friends, you may be here this morning with your heart hung low knowing that you don't have anything to offer God. You, like the people at the base of the mountain, are just one big flat disaster. Your sin has offended your Creator. You know that you are under his displeasure. You have no grounds on which to argue. His judgments are right and just. Hear the good news in relation to your bad news that the Gospel of God is not found in you anyway. Just like this good favorable news to this people, nothing was found in them that commended them to Yahweh. The Gospel is found outside of you in another One who is the only Mediator between God and man, the Son of Man, Christ Jesus. It's him that we glory in this day. It's him that we praise this day. It's him through whom we pray this day. Why? Because we don't have anything on our own name to plead and there's nothing in us praiseworthy, but there is much praiseworthy in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Mediator, that upon his baptism the heavens, there was a voice that came forth. Do you remember? We probably memorized this verse in our childhood. A voice came thundering down saying, "This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." The Mediator, and that one has accomplished all of the work that is pleasing to God. He pleased God in all of his obedience, yea, even his obedience on the death on the cross and where is he now? He's in a place where there's a chair and he's seated. Why? Because that



Mediator has done his work and accomplished it so that you and I can have God look upon us with the same favor that he looks upon the Mediator and treats us the way that he treats the Mediator, just like God is promising to treat the people the same way that the Lord promised that he would treat Moses. "My presence will be with you, Moses, and because of you My presence is gonna be with them."

The greater Moses is the one you should be worshipping today. Don't you see this text is designed to put your eyes off of Moses to the greater Moses, the Mediator between God and man who has gone into the tent with high negotiations and did not plead your righteousness before God but God will be favorable to you because he has found favor in the Mediator and loves him.

Brothers and sisters, we also should be mindful as we close here, as much as the disciples and those who followed Jesus loved the presence of Jesus, they loved being with him, they loved eating with him, they loved walking with him, did you know that it was better that Jesus not be with them? That's a text that we probably should look at sometime where Jesus explicitly states, "It's better for you that I go." Why? Why is it better that Jesus? We might think, "Boy, it would be great if Jesus was here with us right now." He says, "No, you don't understand. By My leaving, I am enabled by My authority to dispense the Holy Spirit upon you so that the glory cloud doesn't rest in a tabernacle or a brick and mortar temple but My glory Spirit will rest and reside within you, the temple of God to which the temple and tabernacle pointed all along." And by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of glory rests upon us, 1 Peter 4, making us a distinct and peculiar people and ones who can say, "God's presence is with me and will never leave me and never forsake me because through the work of our Mediator, the Spirit now resides in the temple, in the tabernacle, in the very presence in the very hearts of His people."

God is with you, my dear brothers and sisters. He is with you wherever you go. He promises his presence to go on with you. May even at the beginning of this year, may I implore us all to be mindful that not to move on and carry on without consideration of his presence and the power that is in that truth.

Let's pray.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank You for our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's Him that we want to make much of because there is nothing in us to make much of. Lord, our boast is in Him, our faith is in Him. O Sola Fide, Sola Fide, faith alone. We have nothing else to rest our all on except our 100% faith in Him, the greater Moses, in whom You are well-pleased. Lord, it humbles us to know that You are pleased with us and that we have all of the blessings of Your favor all because You've placed us in Him, the One in whom You really truly are well-pleased. We love You this day and we glory in the Gospel of Your Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, brothers and sisters, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, in light of the message today, look up and receive not a cursing but a blessing of favor of your God pronounced upon you. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you

and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace both now and forevermore through our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.