

Although some don't realize it, everyone needs God's presence in their life. We are made for relationship with God who knows us and loves us. But experiencing his presence will remain a mystery hidden by our mortality and sin, unless God provides safe access through Christ. Peer inside this now-revealed mystery!

Introduction: This non-introduction illustrates how sometimes you just can't seem to grasp what you're reaching for.

Background: After God delivered his people Israel from bondage in Egypt, gave them his covenant, and provided detailed instructions for building his dwelling among them, Israel responded by committing idolatry. Their worshiping the golden calf was an act of spiritual adultery, breaking their covenant relationship with the LORD and introducing a wide chasm of separation from God. Now only Moses has access to God's presence.

I. Our Need of God's Presence

A. To have God's friendship (vv. 9-11)

1. One of the most attractive and intriguing aspects of the gospel for unbelievers is the prospect of having a personal relationship with God. I think many Christians take this privilege for granted because popular Christianity has dumbed down what the Bible teaches. If God's omnipresence necessarily leads to God's presence as a close friend, then God must be friends with everyone. And if human friendship is fundamentally presence, then God's omnipresence must mean everyone is his friend. That's shoddy thinking, and it's not what the Bible teaches.

2. So what does friendship with God look like? That God spoke "face to face" with Moses, as one speaks with "a friend" does not imply that Moses saw God's face, or that God even has something like a human face. The phrase speaks to the intimacy that Moses shared with God, and that God did actually speak to Moses. Moses saw God truly, but not fully (Num 12:8a). Not through dreams or visions or prophets, but by unmediated verbal communication.

B. To have God's favor (vv. 13, 16)

Is it acceptable to want to be special to God, to have his favor? Yes, when your desire aligns with the calling and election of God. When your will to have God's favor conforms to God's revealed will, then there is nothing silly or arrogant or narcissistic about it. Rather it is evidence you have a firm hold of faith upon his promises. Moses understood there would be nothing to distinguish God's people Israel from all the other nations if they didn't have God's presence. Without his friendship and favor demonstrating his loving presence, Israel might as well just stay in the wilderness.

II. Our Distance from God's Presence

A. God's holiness: a problem for sinners (vv. 7-8)

1. The tent of meeting is "outside" and "far off" from the camp. It was removed from the people, therefore God was removed from his people. Thus the existence and location of the tent of meeting indicated the estranged relationship between God and Israel.

2. That is why God moved his meeting tent far outside the camp. He has not divorced his people, but he has separated from them. By moving out, God is teaching us through the example of our OT forefathers that our sin separates us from him. Only through repentance, mediation, atonement, and forgiveness is covenant relationship restored to harmony.

B. God's glory: a problem for mortals (vv. 18-20)

1. But there is something else that distances us from God's presence: our mortality. One of God's characteristics is glory. In the Bible glory is not flimsy, ephemeral, thin, or passing as it can mean in

English (the "glory" of a sunset or a sports victory). The Hebrew word kavod translated as "glory" means weightiness, solidity, substance, significance, worth, splendor, magnificence, royal grandeur (1 Chr 29:10-11). When God reveals his glory to mortals, it is a visible manifestation of his absolute reality, his person, power, and majesty that theologians call the "glory cloud". His visible glory is dazzling and radiant in its brilliance (Ezek 10:4; Lk 2:9).

2. Behind the cloud is the unveiled brightness of his majesty which is simply too overwhelming for people to look at. Moses probably knew this, but he couldn't resist asking, "Please show me your glory." God, being merciful and gracious, could not allow his friend to look him in the face. Even a quick peek would kill any man.

III. Our Access to God's Presence

A. By way of an intercessor (vv. 12-17)

The people are estranged from God because of their sin, so Moses intercedes on their behalf. The topic of conversation between Moses and God was restoring God's presence to his people through friendship and favor. Moses was a provisional, imperfect mediator. He needed a better covenant mediator to intercede on his behalf. That perfect intercessor is Jesus Christ, who pleads our case before God so we might have access to the Father in his name. For through the mediation of Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19).

B. By way of shelter (vv. 21-23)

Moses will stand on the rock near the LORD, but this rock has a cleft in which he will hide under God's hand. God tells Moses to "behold" the place on the rock where Moses shall stand. God's hand that covers Moses in loving protection prefigures Christ shielding us from God's wrath (Rom 5:9-11). We "behold" Christ through whom we meet God and find protection from his holiness and glory.

C. By way of his "angel" (vv. 12, 14; cf. vv. 2-3)

Notice that God declared earlier he would not go up among the people but would instead "send an angel before you." That is why Moses pleaded with God to go with them, to be their friend and give them favor. But God never cancelled his promise to send an angel. So what is the answer to Moses's question, "Whom will you send with me?" God kept his word, "my presence will go with you," by sending his "angel". He is none other than Emmanuel (God with us), the Son of God himself! When God sends his "angel" to lead his people into the Promised Land, Joshua, the commander of the army of Israel, falls down in worship at the feet of that "angel", the commander of the LORD's army (Josh 5:13-14a). Only by way of Christ, the "angel" of the LORD, may we have access to God's presence.

Conclusion: A biblical mystery is a truth once hidden but now revealed. The mystery of God's presence with us is revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's messenger (i.e., his "angel") and the Bible is his message. This means all those who receive Jesus are God's friends and are favored by him. The degree to which you realize your privileged access to God, to that degree your friendship with God, your humility, your yearning for encountering God in his full glory, and your prayer life will be transformed. Apart from Christ you are distant from God's presence, but through Christ your need for his presence has been met. This mystery invites you to peer inside and behold God's glory.