

The Presence of God

Deuteronomy 5:22-33

When I am preaching, I seldom if ever use personal illustrations about specific people in the congregation, because that would seem to violate any sense of confidentiality and privacy that you might expect in talking to me. But this week, as with most weeks, I had many rather in-depth conversations with many of you, at least ten, and as I prepared this sermon, I recognized that three of those conversations at least broadly touched on the subject of our sermon this morning—namely the glory of the presence of God as it relates to our worship as a church today. I mention that into order to emphasize just how practical, and important, this subject is. The glory of the presence of God. I also mention that in order to emphasis just how timely these Old Testament passages are for our life and existence together as a congregation today.

Clearly, Deuteronomy 5 is in the Old Covenant. God spoke on the mountain, in the midst of smoke and fire, and outwardly things were very different for the covenant people of God than they are today. At the very least, we have no smoke. No fire. But there is still much for us to learn about our relationship with God today from this passage in the Old Covenant.

So we begin with that very general but obvious sense of,

I. THE GLORY OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

Remember where we are in this book. We just finished a study of the ten commandments, those commandments being repeated after being first given by God to his people at Mt. Sinai. Again, a reminder of the overall context. God's people Israel had left Egypt. They had been delivered out of Egypt, freed by God from the slavery they had experienced under Pharaoh. That

exodus out of Egypt was their deliverance, their salvation. And they were promised the blessing of their own land, the promised land. Here in Deuteronomy, they are about to enter that promised land. Remember that a whole generation has died in the wilderness during a period of 40 years of wandering, but now they are about to receive the promised inheritance of the land of Canaan. So God speaks to them again, a second time.

And what stands out so clearly is the glory of his presence. The greatness, the majesty of God's presence. I could use the word transcendence, referring to God as going beyond our existence, being greater than us. Indeed, he is God, the creator of the universe, and we are his creatures. That's the situation before us. Let me remind you that that is our situation today, as well, even though our outward circumstances are so very different.

v.24

So what do we know about the glory of the presence of God? How do we learn about it? Answer, images. God gives us images of himself.

A. We should learn about God from the images of his glory which he describes.

So let's do that, learn about God. The first image is fire.

v.22

"The mountain was burning with fire."

Go back just a bit to Deuteronomy 4, where Moses was addressing the people of Israel. He reminds the people that God makes himself know through fire, not through a visible or physical form. God is a spirit, he does not have a body nor any sense of physical existence, so we as his people see him as fire.

Deut. 4:11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the

mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. 12 And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice...”

And the whole point of that image of fire is to warn us that we must never reduce God to a physical form, nor ever give in to the temptation to worship any physical form.

Deut. 4:15 “Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, 17 the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, 18 the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth. 19 And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the Lord your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage. 20 But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day. 21 Furthermore the Lord was angry with me for your sakes, and swore that I would not cross over the Jordan, and that I would not enter the good land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. 22 But I must die in this land, I must not cross over the Jordan; but you shall cross over and possess that good land. 23 Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you. 24 For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”

God is not a creature. He is fire. He is God. And lest you

think that was just an Old Testament image that is irrelevant for us, consider what we read in,

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

Ex. 24:16 “Now the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. 17 The sight of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel.”

The image teaches us about the nature of God’s glory, how distinct he is from us. He is fire. And he is a cloud, going back to our text, verse 22. And like fire, the cloud emphasizes God’s transcendent glory. He is not one of us, he is not part of creation. His glory is as evident and distinct as the great clouds that cover the sky. It’s a familiar image, and we read,

Ex. 24:13 “So Moses arose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up to the mountain of God. 14 And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we come back to you. Indeed, Aaron and Hur are with you. If any man has a difficulty, let him go to them.” 15 Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. 16 Now the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. 17 The sight of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. 18 So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

Related to the cloud is the darkness, a thick darkness, verse 22 of our text. And a loud voice. That's not hard to understand, is it? But an obvious emphasis. God is not separated from his people in their experience, but he intrudes into our lives. He intrudes into our creaturely existence by speaking to us. And speaking to us with power, and authority. Again verse 22, "with a loud voice."

All of that is for our benefit, for our learning.

B. We should sense the effects of God's presence in our own experience.

When it comes to the presence of God, we don't just go through the motions. It's not just an outward ritual or an ordinary routine. The presence of the glory of God changes everything, as it is something we should experience.

That's where the conversations I had this week tended to focus, with reference to our experience as a church, and the awareness of the need to experience the glory of God's presence. And how important that is for us as a church. Yet in some ways, it's harder for us. We have no fire, no cloud, no smoke, no audible voice. But it is still crucial. We are not engaged in some merely human get-together in which we enjoy the familiarity and casual enjoyment of each other's presence. No, we have come into the presence of God. By faith, to be sure, not by sight. But in truth. In reality. We come to worship together in church in order to meet with God, and we ought to be eager to sense the effect of his presence.

The people of Israel knew what that meant. They understood the glory of God even as they understood their own sinfulness, and so they realized that they could not exist in the presence of God and still live. They couldn't see God and live! It is the same

idea as looking at the sun. No man can look at the sun and not be made blind. It's just too bright! Too glorious.

Do you remember when Moses asked to see God, to see God's glory?

Ex. 33:18 And he said, "Please, show me Your glory." 19 Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." 20 But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." 21 And the Lord said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. 22 So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. 23 Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."

The people of the God in the Old Covenant understood what that meant. They understood all the implications of it.

v.23-24

That amazed them, as it startled them. They certainly didn't take it for granted. And they were careful not to presume upon God's favor to let them live. So they left the mountain!

v.25-27

Let me spend just a few minutes focusing then the voice of God.

II. THE VOICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

That was how God made himself known to his people. That is still how God makes himself known to his people. He speaks to them!

v.22

Then also, v.30-31

This is such a crucial idea, such a critical element of our faith and life, the realization and recognition that God speaks to us. And what stands out in this case is,

A. The unchanging permanence of God's voice.

Which is to say, when God spoke to his people he wrote his words on two tablets of stone! That's about as permanent as it can be. Unchangeable.

Let me just say it plainly and clearly at this point, God's word is unchanging. God's word is permanent. God doesn't change his word or is law according to what is popular in society. He doesn't change with a new or modern generation. His word to us is eternally and unchangeably true.

For us, now, of course, that word has been written down. And not just about stone, but in books. And that word, which we now call Scripture, cannot be broken. It cannot be changed. For the one who wrote it does not change.

Even further, we should not that this word of God actually became flesh. This word which God spoke is ultimately the second person of the trinity, this word is nothing less and no one other than Jesus.

Heb. 1:1 "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power."

And that word, Jesus, is also unchanging and permanent.

Heb. 13:8 "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

What a great blessing that is, to have the word of God. We don't think of that often enough,

B. The blessing of God's voice.

That blessing is made clear in,
v.29

"...that it may be well with you." Not that God takes away all your problems, for surely he doesn't. But his word remains a blessing. And life lived according to his word is a blessing. It will go well with you if you recognize and honor authority. It will go well with you if you honor and protect life. It will go well with you if you preserve your sexual purity and morality. It will go well with you if you do not steal from others or lie to others. It will go well with you if you have no other gods but one, and worship with with all your heart and soul. It will go well with you if you walk with the Lord and listen to his voice. That's the blessing!

Deut. 4:40 "You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

That idea is carried over into the New Testament so clearly. For example,

Eph. 6:1 "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: 3 "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

That doesn't mean that there aren't some godly people who

die young. It's not mechanical or mathematical equation by which we measure things according to our own perspective. But the point is clearly made, that God's law is good. His ways are good. And those who listen to his voice know this blessing. The commandment comes with a promise, a promise of blessing. God's word, God's voice, is its own blessing.

v.33

Let me end this morning with a practical focus, answering the question of how we should respond to this revelation of God's glory. What is the appropriate response.

III. THE RESPONSE OF GOD'S PEOPLE TO HIS PRESENCE.

Again, let me emphasize, this is where the connection is made to our own lives, here and now. Our response should be the same as that of the people of God in the Old Covenant. Look at, v.28-29

The Lord is expressing his own desire here, praising the response of the people to himself, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them." God longs for his people to have this sort of response, and he identifies it within their heart. And what is that heart, for which God longs in his people? As verse 29 continues, "that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments."

That's what God wants from our us, from our hearts. That we would fear him. Not the fear of terror. Not the fear of insecurity or the fear of his rejection. But the fear of reverence.

A. Reverence and awe.

Reverence means to give honor. And awe is to be struck by his majesty. That's why we are casual in our approach to God. That's why we are careful when we approach him in our worship.

That's why we can't think too highly of ourselves nor exalt our own glory. Because it is God's honor that must consume your heart and soul. It is the advancement of God's honor that must be the motivating desire of your heart. Reverence and awe.

Rev. 14:6 "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people— 7 saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water."

Please think of this in practical terms, especially in terms of our gathering together for worship. The ought to be a measure of order, a measure of solemnity that recognizes the transcendent glory of God. This place is glorious, because God is here. This worship service is special, because is hear. And this sermon is meaningful because we are receiving and listening to the voice of God as he speaks in his word.

This is important! It's not just a ritual, not just a familiar routine. We have come into the presence of the God who made this world and who holds the world until the day of judgment. And we who believe in Jesus have come to celebrate in God's own kingdom. And so we read

Heb. 12:25 "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, 26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 27 Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God

acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

There’s that fire again! Our God is a consuming fire. And so we come to him with reverence and awe, godly fear. And in that godly fear, we listen to his word. And we respond with,

B. Careful observance.
v.31-33

Be careful, give your careful attention and diligent consideration to what God has to say. Listen to his words, and be doers of his word not hearers only.

To be sure, that takes effort on our part, and so we are urged to exert just such an effort. “Be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you.” That’s the conclusion to a study of God’s law. “Be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you.”

Don’t be careless, negligent, or reckless. “You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.” So these words come to us as they came to Joshua, who would be the man God chose to lead his people into their promised land.

Joshua 1:7 “Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

That is our calling. That is your calling. Reverence and awe in the presence of God. And careful observance to keep and to do his word.

Eccles. 12:9 And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth. 11 The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. 12 And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh. 13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man’s all. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.”

“Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man’s all.”

Please understand that we don’t keep God’s commandments in an effort to earn or merit our own salvation. We don’t keep God’s commandments in order to secure a place in heaven. We don’t obey the law in order to atone for our sin. No, we keep God’s commandments as the testimony of our love to the one who has first loved us and saved us by his grace. We keep God’s commandments as the very expression of what it means to fear him, to honor and respect him with all of our heart.

And so, when Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment of them all, his answer was simple and straightforward,

Mat. 22:37 “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall

love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

And just so you understand where Jesus is quoting from, look just ahead,

Deut. 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.”

“Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man’s all.”