

THE THREAT OF SEPARATION FROM GOD: GOD'S CALL AND WARNING EXODUS 33:01–11

Introduction

Sin separates a person from God. God is holy, pure and righteous; therefore, God can have nothing to do with sin. He has to judge and condemn sin. His holy nature demands it. But even more than this, God is love; He is merciful and gracious. God has to exercise His love toward man. Therefore, God has to execute justice on behalf of all who have been hurt and wronged by other people. God has to execute justice upon all the sinners and evil people upon earth. This is the reason for the coming day of judgment, the reason why God must execute justice upon earth.

This was the experience of the Israelites. They had just sinned, broken their commitment to God, disobeyed and rejected God. They had broken the Ten Commandments; consequently the judgment of God was about to fall upon Israel. But Moses had gone before God in behalf of Israel: he had prayed and prayed, asking God to forgive Israel. The present passage shows Moses still before God, still seeking God to forgive and restore His people into His favour. This is the important subject of this passage: *The Threat of Separation from God and Moses' Great Intercession: The Essentials for Repentance and Renewal After Sinning*, Exodus 33:1-23.

- I. Essential 1: hearing God's call and God's warning — the warning that sin causes Him to withdraw His personal presence (vv. 1-3).
- II. Essential 2: repentance (vv. 4-6).
- III. Essential 3: understanding that God does withdraw His presence, does chastise His people (vv. 7-11).
- IV. Essential 4: intercession for restoration and renewal, for God's full presence and guidance (vv. 12-17).
- V. Essential 5: pleading to know the LORD more and more (vv. 18-23).

I. *Exodus 33:01–03 Hearing God's Call and God's Warning*

The first essential to restoration is clear: a person must hear God's call and God's warning, the warning that sin causes God to withdraw His presence.

1. Note God's call: God told Moses to leave Mt. Sinai and proceed to the promised land (v. 1). God had made a promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: if they believed God, really believed and followed God, He would give them the glorious inheritance of the promised land, a land that flowed with milk and honey, a land that would give them rest from all their enemies (a symbol of heaven).

God always fulfils His promise. Man may be unfaithful, but God is faithful (2 Tim 2:13). Man may break his commitment to God, but God does not break His

commitment to man. The Israelites had committed a terrible, deplorable sin: they had sinned and broken the covenant, their commitment to God.

They had turned away from God, turned back to the world, to its false worship and drunkenness, dancing and immorality. And the judgment of God was about to fall upon them. But Moses had interceded for the people. He had prayed long and hard for God to forgive their terrible sin (Exo 32:30-34). God had heard Moses' prayer and forgiven their sin. Now it was time for them to get up and once again begin their journey to the promised land.

2. But note what God promised: a *limited presence* and a *limited guidance* (v. 2). God would no longer guide them Himself. God would send a guardian angel to guide His people, but His *personal presence* would no longer dwell in their midst and guide them.

This news was obviously a shock, a frightening shock to Moses and the Israelites. From the beginning, God's very own presence had guided them as they journeyed to the promised land. God's presence had been symbolized in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. But now, the pillar of cloud was obviously to be removed, no longer guiding and protecting them (see Exo 13:21-22; 14:19-20).

3. Note why God could no longer grant them His *personal presence*, why He could no longer give them His unlimited presence and guidance (v. 3). And note, this stands as a threat and warning from God: He would withdraw His presence, His personal guidance and protection...
 - because the people were stubborn and sinful: stiff-necked, hard and disobedient.
 - because God could not stand the presence of sin. His holiness — His righteousness and purity — is just. Therefore, when a person sins, God has to execute justice.

The people were a stiff-necked, stubborn people. As they journeyed to the promised land, the likelihood was that they were going to continue to sin, continue to disobey and turn away from God. If the very special presence of God — the special manifestation of God's presence — were dwelling in their midst, God's holiness and righteousness would strike immediately and execute justice. The people would be destroyed.

Thought 1. Sin separates us from God. When we continue in sin, God's presence is no longer alive within our hearts and lives. We become dull and lose the sense of His presence, of His guidance and care.

Psa 66:18 *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened.*

Isa 59:2 *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

Isa 64:7 *No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.*

Hos 5:6 *When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the LORD, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them.*

1 Th 5:19 Do not put out the Spirit's fire.

Heb 10:38-39 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

2 Pet 2:20 If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.

II. *Exodus 33:04–06 Repentance*

The second essential for restoration is an absolute essential, that of repentance. The news that a mere angel would lead them, that God Himself — His personal presence — would no longer guide them, distressed the Israelites. They become deeply concerned, worried and troubled over the news. They knew that things were not right — not fully right — in their relationship with God. Note what happened:

1. The people began to mourn and repent (v. 4-5). Their repentance is symbolized in that they wore no jewellery. Jewellery was apparently a symbol of worldliness, a sign of being fleshly and carnal, that a person was seeking to attract attention to one's flesh. Three reasons are given for the people's repentance (v. 5).
 - => They heard God's charge, that they were stiff-necked and sinful.
 - => They heard God's warning of judgment, that if they continued to sin, He would destroy them.
 - => They heard God's demand for repentance, that they strip off their jewellery (a sign of worldliness), that they symbolize true repentance and mourning for their sin.
2. Note how this point is restressed: the people stripped off their jewellery. They obeyed God: they repented (v. 6).

Thought 1. Repentance is essential to restoration. When we sin, we must repent.

- => We must not remain stiff-necked and sinful.
- => We must hear God's warning: if we continue to sin, His judgment will fall upon us.
- => We must hear God's demand for repentance: we must strip off all signs of worldliness.

2 Chr 7:14 If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Isa 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Ezek 18:21 "But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.

Ezek 18:31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

Joel 2:12 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'

Mat 3:2 And saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Luke 13:3 "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Acts 8:22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

Acts 17:30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

III. *Exodus 33:07–11 Understand God's Chastisement*

The third essential for restoration must be understood: a person must understand that God does chastise His people when they sin. God does withdraw His presence. When a person sins, he loses his sensitivity to God's presence. He loses his deep sense of God's guidance, assurance, care, protection and security. God begins to seem far, far away — unreachable.

This was what happened to the Israelites. God had threatened to chastise them because of their terrible sin. God loved the Israelites just as He loves us. Consequently, when they sinned, He had to chastise them — to correct and discipline them. God's way of bringing chastisement was by withdrawing His presence.

1. This was symbolized by Moses taking a tent outside the camp and declaring that it was to be the worship centre of Israel (v. 7). It was called the "Tent of Meeting," the place where the believer was to meet God. The point: God's presence was to be outside the camp, away from the people, not inside the camp, not among the people. Concerned believers — those who really wanted to seek after the LORD — had to go outside the camp to seek Him.
2. Note what Moses did: he *continually* went to the tent to seek the LORD (V. 8). His concern over God's chastisement, over God's withdrawal of His presence, drove Moses to seek the LORD. Picture what Scripture now says:
 - a. The people were also deeply concerned. They showed unusual reverence. When Moses entered the "Tent of Meeting," every man rose up and stood at the door of his tent. Picture the scene. Several million people stopping whatever they were doing,

walking over to their doors and standing there in a moment of prayer and silence while their mediator, Moses, approached God on their behalf.

- b. As Moses entered the "Tent of Meeting," the pillar of cloud (the LORD's presence) descended and hovered at the entrance to the tent (v. 9). And the LORD discussed the situation with Moses while Moses prayed and sought the LORD.
- c. Note what the people did while Moses was in the tent: they were so concerned that they stood at the doors of their tents and worshipped the LORD (v. 10). They too sought the LORD for full restoration, for the restoration...
 - of God's personal presence
 - of God's guidance, care and assurance
 - of God's protection and security
- d. Scripture says an amazing thing: God would actually speak with Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend (v. 11; see Num 12:8; Deut 34:10). Imagine this! What glorious experiences Moses had with God. These times were obviously special revelations to Moses, special manifestations of God's presence and voice. Remember the great call God had given Moses, the awesome task Moses had: leading God's people out of slavery, organizing and establishing them into a nation, and leading them through the wilderness journey for 40 years, 40 long, hard years. Moses needed special experiences, very special encounters with God. His call and task were probably the most difficult call and task ever assigned to a man. The truth of this statement is seen by thinking through the awesome, even terrifying task pictured in *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*.
- e. Note that Joshua always stayed behind to pray and guard the worship centre after Moses left (v. 11). Moses made it a habit to expose Joshua to the presence of God. He had taken Joshua up the mountain with him, and now he placed Joshua into the *only* tent where God's presence was manifested.

Thought 1. We must understand one thing: God chastises us when we sin. God loves us, loves us with a perfect love; therefore, when we sin, God sets out to discipline and correct us. God's chastisement is not for the purpose of punishment: it is to discipline and correct us, to keep us from harming and destroying ourselves. Because of this, God will always chastise us when we sin. God will always discipline and correct us because He loves us and wants the very best for us.

Deut 8:5 *Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.*

Psa 94:12 *Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law.*

Prov 3:11-12 *My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.*

John 15:2 *“He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”*

1 Cor 11:30-32 *That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.*

Heb 12:5-6 *And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” ■*