

Practicing the Presence of God

*The LORD replied,
"My Presence will go with you,
and I will give you rest."*

Exodus 33:14

Introduction: Let's start with a Bible study from *Exodus 33*.

That chapter is a discussion between God and Moses right after the notorious golden calf incident at Mt. Sinai. In verse 3, God gave the most disturbing words they had ever heard, "*I will not go with you.*" What follows is the account of Moses successfully pleading with God for him to change that judgement.

Please take the two and a half minutes to read *Exodus 33* before we continue.

Here are three things that stick out to me from that chapter:

(1) The intimacy of the relationship between God and Moses.

In Moses' famous "*tent of meeting*," they talked face to face, as a friend talks to a friend (verse 11). God knew Moses by name. And this is a great encouragement to us. That makes me feel humbled, yet important, like what I do matters to God. It's like being in the presence of someone you admire and find out that they know you by name and really show an interest in you. But Moses did not know God as well as God knew him, so he asked God to reveal himself to him, to teach him his ways so Moses could know him better (verse 13). This God was willing to do.

(2) God's protection of Moses in the cleft of the rock (verses 17 – 23).

I guess God knows that getting to know him can be kind of frightening to our finite minds and we need the reassurance that he is not going to show us something that will hurt us. That makes me feel secure like having a guarantee I can count on.

(3) The statement in verse 14, as quoted at the top, that "*My Presence will go with you.*"

That *Presence of God* is the topic of this study, and in particular the attitude that Moses had about the presence of God (verse 15) that if God's presence did not go with him, then Moses did not want to go.

So, the goal of this study is to help us all appreciate the importance of:

- continually living with an awareness of the presence of God,
- the effects that such an awareness will have on us, and
- how we can put into practice a life that exhibits an awareness of the presence of God.

I. The Importance and the Possibility of the Presence of God

Here are just a few of the many Scriptures discussing the presence of God.

A. *John 14:23*

Here Jesus promised that he and the Father would make their home with us, just as he also promised that the Holy Spirit would be in us (verse 17). This is a promise, but I think we may forget how necessary and possible it is to continually live in the presence of God.

B. Example: *Genesis 28:16*

Jacob verbalized what we may have experienced many times, "*God is here, and I did not know it.*" God is present in your life; you don't want to miss the blessing of being aware of that presence.

Like the young boy who prayed after going to church one day, "*God, we had a great time at church today. Wish you could have been there.*"

Jeremiah 2:32 gives a much more serious thought, as God laments: "*My people have forgotten me days without number.*"

We know that by living in God's presence, we will be eternally happy, but yet we go hours and days without an awareness of God's presence. This may not be true for you, but it is for me.

C. So, what can we do about it?

The purpose of this study is not to frustrate us about our failures to stay aware of the presence of God, but the goal is to impress upon us both the necessity and the possibility of doing so.

Think carefully about your answers to these two questions:

- Do you think that it is **necessary** to have the presence of God in your life?
- Do you think that it is **possible** for you to be more consistently aware of that presence?

II. Practicing His Presence

A. Brother Lawrence (1611 – 1681)

A man known for his simplicity, his service to others, his love for God, and most of all for his desire to live continually with an awareness of the presence of God.

B. He coined the phrase: *Practicing His Presence*. What does it mean?

1. First of all, it means being a Christian in whom God lives. That is true for all Christians.
2. But, more than that, it means being continually aware of God and putting into practice the things that result from having him present. Clearly, not everyone does that.

RECOMMENDATION: Get a copy of the short book *Practicing His Presence*. It's published in many formats. If you're like me, it will be one that you want to read again every year.

III. What Are Some Results of Practicing His Presence?

A. Rest, peace, freedom from worry.

That's what God promised Moses in the verse quoted earlier "*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*"

Rest and freedom from worry, because I don't have to worry about the success of my plans. It's exciting to know that God's plans are much more consistent than mine. As Pamela Reeve said, "*Faith is . . . thanking God when I am left with shattered plans, that he has better plans.*" (From her book "*Faith is . . .*")

- B. The more we practice the presence of God, the more we love him with all of our heart.

With God, knowing him better equals loving him more.

- C. The amazing number of opportunities that result from being aware of God's presence.

Have you ever complained about not knowing what to do for God? It's amazing how open our eyes can get to opportunities to serve God (opportunities that were always there), when we practice his presence.

- D. Treating others the way God would treat them.

Our friends, the people we work with and for, our family, our neighbors, our church brothers and sisters. Everyone. When we are aware of God's presence, we will be frequently asking him, "What would you say, do, etc.?" This makes us feel better about others and not so worried about their response to us, because our focus is on God's will, not their response.

This is one of the hardest things for me. I know that when I am harsh to someone or say unloving things to them or am blind to their needs, it is because I am not treating them the way God would. And that is because I am not practicing his presence in the moment.

- E. In particular, this will make us aware of opportunities to share God with people who need him.

In short, this will motivate us in every area of our Christian life.

Two more questions to think about carefully:

- What have you seen in your life about the benefits of practicing the presence of God?

- What do you think would be the results of doing so more and more?

IV. How Can We Do This?

How can we practice the presence of God? How can we put into practice a life of continual awareness of God?

- A. It takes time.

When Moses said "*teach me your ways so I may know you*" (Exodus 33:13), he then spent the rest of his life in pursuit of knowing his God.

1. A college student spends close to 20 hours a week in class, plus studying time. We can't expect to learn to be a disciple of Christ by spending one hour a week in a church service.
2. The first thing I had to do was to look at my schedule and see the way I was using my time.

So, we may want to spend more time in prayer and devotion, and less time on recreation.

But more than that, we need to learn to pray without ceasing and be aware of God, not just during periods of worship (personal or group), but always. As we are driving, working, eating, playing, whatever. Learn to do these things with God.

One of the things Brother Lawrence taught was to not think of prayer times as different from other times when it comes to being close to God. We should always be that close to God and do absolutely everything for the love of God.

- B. We need the help of others who are also trying to practice his presence.

I couldn't make it without the help of my wife and others who encourage me.

- C. Don't be afraid of failure or let our failures discourage us.

We can learn a lot from Brother Lawrence's attitude about failing, If he realized that he had just gone through a long period without the awareness of God, then he was made more aware of what he is without him, and more dedicated to his goal. As he said, "Have but one fear: fear to leave Him."

What can you do today to begin, or continue, practicing the presence of God?

Conclusion: Where was God:

- When you lost your temper?
- When you yelled at your spouse, child, or roommate?
- When you saw that inappropriate movie?
- When you didn't talk to anyone about God last week, and complained "*I just don't have any opportunities to share my faith*"?

God was still with us in all of the situations described above, and many more. But we can probably see that we certainly weren't aware of or practicing his presence at those times.

On the other hand, where was God:

- When you said that kind word of forgiveness?
- Spent some quality time with your family?
- When you spent time with some forgotten person?
- When you had that chance to witness?

God's Spirit can prompt us to do positive things like these, almost without thinking. But, again, we can probably see that an awareness of his presence will prompt us to do them intentionally and with a great attitude.

All of these efforts to practice the presence of God are motivated by our love for him, and result in the natural response of loving him even more. One last quote from Brother Lawrence. "*our only endeavor should be to love Him with all our hearts.*"

Let's wake up to the necessity and the possibility, with God's help, of practicing his presence, and find the infinite joy that results.

John Sullivan

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Author's footnote:	This concept has been the goal of my life for the last 50 years. I wish I could say that I am good at it. But what I can say is that I have never regretted taking it as a goal. (J.S.)
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