

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **A Heart Not Satisfied**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 33

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Have you had a good argument with God lately? Maybe you think the question is impertinent and out of order, but the fact is, many great biblical characters took God on. Some won, some lost. Job lost. Haggai lost. But Moses is one who came out ahead. I believe many of us are far too passive in our relationship with God. We assume it's God's job to pursue us, not ours to pursue Him. And make no mistake about it—God does pursue us. In fact, none of us would be members of God's family were it not for the initiative He takes in drawing us to Himself.

But divine initiative does not preclude human initiative. God honors those whose hearts are not satisfied with the spiritual *status quo* and who, in an effort to dispel the coldness and darkness that so easily set in, plead with God to reveal Himself and cry out for greater intimacy with Him.

A man in my previous church once came to my office and confessed, “I'm not sure I have a personal relationship with God.” I was a little surprised because I had heard this man's testimony and had seen evidence of spiritual growth in his life, so I questioned him as to what he meant. He said he was bothered by the fact that so many Christians seem to have Damascus Road types of experiences, which he never had. In addition people talk so much about how personal God is to them and how He talks to them and guides them. In contrast, he said, “I struggle in my relationship with God. There are times when I wonder if He's there or not. I just wish He'd talk back to me when I pray. I wish I could understand the Bible as well when I'm reading it as I do when someone else is teaching it.”

You know what I told him? I said, “I think your spiritual experience is quite normal; in fact, it may be more normal than that of those who are intimidating you.” A lot of people talk piously at church because that's what's expected. Some use God-talk incessantly—“God told me this, God showed me that.” But where the rubber meets the road they too struggle at times with feelings of distance from God. I know I do. I really do love God and I want to live for Him, but is my relationship with Him the kind I can honestly describe as constantly personal and intimate? No. I hope that doesn't disappoint you and cause you to think about moving to some church whose pastor is a spiritual dynamo 24-7.

Well, what can we do about this—you and I? Many Christians just accept the disconnectedness they feel as inevitable. They assume that a distant relationship with God and a second-hand faith is all they can ever expect to have. Oh, they continue to go through the religious motions in order to avoid feelings of guilt or the disapproval of their Christian friends, but they have given up hope of ever having a truly vital relationship with God.

Well, Moses struggled like many of us but he refused to accept as normal any sense of estrangement from God or lack of intimacy with Him. But before we examine how he pursued God, let's establish the context of our Scripture passage for today, Exodus 33.

When the Israelites first escaped from Egypt they expected to take the northern route to Palestine

and be there in a few weeks. God instead directed them south and had them stay for nearly a year in the isolated, desolate desert area known as Sinai. God chose this place so He could have their full attention (there wasn't anything else to do at Sinai) as He worked to mold them into a nation fit for the Promised Land. A major aspect of this process was the giving of the Law, not only the Ten Commandments, the Moral Law, but also the Civil and Criminal Law and the Religious and Ceremonial Law which we examined last Lord's Day.

Tragically, at the exact time Moses was up on the mountain receiving the stone tablets of the Law the people were violating the very essence of the Ten Commandments by making a Golden Calf. Even though we did not preach on this incident as recorded in Exodus 32, most of you know about it from previous Bible study. So serious was this sin in God's eyes that He determined to exterminate the people and start a new nation from Moses. They were spared from complete destruction only because of the incredible intercession of Moses. Let's read the Scripture that tells what happened as Israel prepared to break camp and head toward the Promised Land, Exodus 33:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."

When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.'" So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

(Background paragraph. Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.) That background explains what happens next, as Moses goes to the Tent of Meeting.

Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

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

Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up

from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Much had happened during the year at Sinai. It was an experience Israel would never forget. But now . . .

The time has come for the Israelites to leave Mt. Sinai and head toward the Promised Land. (1-6)

God's marching orders are given. In Ex. 33:1 God tells them, "Go up to the land I promised." The trip from Sinai to Palestine would normally take about two months, and I suspect the Israelites were terribly excited when word first came that they were about to break camp. (Tragically, as we will see in a few weeks, the trip ended up taking almost 40 years because of their rebellion, and most of them wouldn't be alive to witness the actual entrance, but they didn't know that yet). Not only are God's marching orders given, but also His promise is received.

God's promise is received. In verse 2 God says, "I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites." These nations are fierce and terribly threatening to an unarmed people like Israel. But by the power of His avenging angel God is going to sweep the land clear of the enemies. Everything was going to work out. But there's only one problem. God Himself has decided not to make the trip.

God's disappointment is revealed. "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you; because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." The joy and enthusiasm that greeted the marching orders and the promise of angelic help are instantly dampened by this discouraging development. Apparently no longer will the cloud accompany them by day and the pillar of fire by night—symbols of the divine presence. An angel is nothing to sneeze at, but will he have the same care and concern for them that Yahweh had, the same power to protect them, the same willingness to forgive their failures? In fact, verse 2 promises only "an angel," not "the angel of the Lord," who is probably the pre-incarnate Christ. God is only sending an ordinary angel, and this generates such fear and doubt on the part of the people that they respond with deep repentance.

God's people respond appropriately. They begin to mourn, and they remove their jewelry. Jewelry has always been an indication of prosperity, success, and happiness, and now is not the time for such displays. Interestingly, to this day orthodox Jews refrain from wearing jewelry, particularly at the time of their religious holidays and feasts. But more importantly, the people recognize that if God is not in their midst, even if they make it to the Promised Land, they have lost the only thing that really matters—the presence of God and a relationship with Him.

Friends, we need to think about this. Too often we love God's blessings more than God Himself. As long as He gives us what we ask for, we're content to have an arm's length relationship. Israel knew that Sinai at its worst with God was better than the Promised Land at its best without Him.

Well, the order has been given that it's time for the Israelites to move on.

But Moses is not ready to move on.

Before we try to find out why, let's first consider the parenthetical paragraph from verse 7-11. Here we learn something about Moses' normal interaction with God. It says he “used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the ‘tent of meeting.’” By the way, this is not the Tabernacle, which isn't even built until chapters 35ff; it's a precursor of that tent, a special place for the people to seek God's will. When Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance—evidence of the Shekinah glory—while the Lord spoke with Moses face to face. This does not mean that Moses could see God, for just a few verse later God would say, “no one may see me and live” (verse 20). Rather it is a figure of speech intended to show that God and his prophet enjoyed direct communication. Moses had immediate access to God. A great deal of respect was accorded Moses when He went into the tent, for the people would stand at their own tents and worship, realizing that Moses was their mediator with God.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be the only person on earth with whom God communicated directly? Every time God wanted to say anything to anybody He'd say it through you? Wow, that's heady stuff! But Moses is not satisfied. He wants *more*. First, He wants to know God's choice of a helper.

He wants to know God's choice of a helper for him. Look at verse 12: “Moses said to the Lord, ‘You have been telling me, “Lead these people,” but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.’” It's possible Moses wants to know who this angel of verse 3 is, but I think it more likely that he wants to know who his human helper will be. Up to this time God had provided Aaron to be Moses' voice and his colleague in leadership, but Aaron had sadly caved in to the desires of the people and had made a Golden Calf. Then he had tried to excuse himself by blaming the people. I assume that even though Aaron remains the High Priest, Moses no longer has confidence in him. He knows in his heart that Aaron is not up to the spiritual task of helping him lead God's people to the Promised Land. But who will?

I think it is not accidental that verse 11 has a very cryptic reference to Moses' young aide Joshua, the son of Nun. Did you notice it? Speaking of Moses' experience at the tent of meeting, it says, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent." Joshua has been mentioned twice before in Exodus, in chapter 17 as the courageous warrior who defeated the Amalekites while Moses held his hands up in prayer, and in chapter 24 where we are told that Joshua was the only one allowed to accompany Moses part way up Mt. Sinai when he first received the Ten Commandments. Now we find him refusing to leave the tent of meeting even after Moses returns to the camp.

There seems to be in this young man a heart for God, so much so that he lingers where the presence of God is evident. Moses wants to know God's choice of a helper, and God seems to be answering that desire. This man Joshua is the one God is going to send with him and who will actually lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land.

Moses also desires to know God's ways. In verse 12 Moses speaks to God, "You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you." If anyone knew God, Moses did. But he wanted to know him even better. Is that a passion in your life and mine?

J. I. Packer has written a marvelous book entitled, *Knowing God*. I have read it many times and every time I read it I am convicted by the chapter, "The People Who Know their God." Allow me to read a couple of paragraphs:

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, for I've known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me, and set me thinking.

Not many of us, I think, would ever naturally say that we have known God. The words imply a definiteness and matter-of-factness of experience to which most of us, if we are honest, have to admit that we are still strangers. We claim, perhaps, to have a testimony, and can rattle off our conversion story with the best of them; we say that we know God—this, after all, is what evangelicals are expected to say; but would it occur to us to say, without hesitation, and with reference to particular events in our personal history, that we have known God? I doubt it, for I suspect that with most of us experience of God has never become so vivid as that.

Nor, I think, would many of us ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy past disappointments and present heartbreaks . . . don't matter. For the plain fact is that to most of us they do matter. We live with them as our "crosses" (so we call them). Constantly we find ourselves slipping into bitterness and apathy and gloom as we reflect on them, which we frequently do. The attitude we show to the world is a sort of dried-up stoicism, miles removed from the "joy unspeakable and full of glory" which Peter took for granted that his readers were

displaying. "Poor souls," our friends say of us, "how they've suffered"—and that is just what we feel about ourselves!

But these private mock heroics have no place at all in the minds of those who really know God. They never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained.

"What things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ," wrote Paul. "Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him . . . that I may know him . . ." When Paul says he counts the things he lost "dung", he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure? Yet this, in effect, is what many of us do. It shows how little we have in the way of true knowledge of God.

We need frankly to face ourselves at this point. We are, perhaps, orthodox evangelicals. We can state the gospel clearly, and can smell unsound doctrine a mile away. If anyone asks us how men may know God, we can at once produce the right formulae—that we come to know God through Jesus Christ the Lord, in virtue of His cross and mediation, on the basis of His word of promise, by the power of the Holy Spirit, via a personal exercise of faith. Yet the gaiety, goodness, and freedom of spirit which are the marks of those who have known God are rare among us . . .ⁱ

Packer then concludes, "a little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about Him."

Please notice something very important here in verse 13. Moses desires to know God and His ways better, but not just for his own sake. His desire is related directly to his people. He says at the end of verse 13, "Remember that this nation is *your* people." Moses is the premier intercessor. He loves God's people and he will not seek God's favor selfishly for himself unless it includes the people.

He demands assurance of God's presence with the people. We have to read verses 14 and 15 carefully, because on the surface they don't seem to make much sense. God says to Moses in verse 14, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." But then Moses turns right around and says to God, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." Why does Moses respond the way he does to God's promise? Why doesn't he say, "Thank you, that's exactly what I wanted!" Instead he says, "If *you* don't go, God, *we* won't go," and He says this right after God tells him His presence would go with him.

The answer is found in the pronouns God and Moses use. God uses the second person *singular* in promising His presence: "My presence will go with you, Moses, and I will give you, Moses, rest." But Moses uses the first person *plural*: "If your Presence does not go with *us*, do not send *us* up from here." Then twice in verse 16 Moses uses the phrase "me *and* your people" to make certain God understands that the people are part of the bargain.

And Moses prevails, for in verse 17 God says, "OK, Moses, I will do *the very thing* you have

asked. I will assure you of my Presence and my rest, not only for you personally but also for these people.” Why? “Because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” Do you ever doubt that intercession is effective? Do you find yourself at times doubting that earnest and persistent prayer for someone you love can eventually result in that person's salvation or restoration or healing? Moses' experience says it can. God had determined to send the people with only an angelic guardian. But because Moses was willing to wrestle with God and plead for His unmediated Presence among His people, God changed His mind.

Think about it another way. God may do something for a loved one of yours, not because that person deserves it but because He wants to honor you. I firmly believe I have received certain blessings in my life, not because God was rewarding me but rather because He was rewarding my mother, who has faithfully prayed for me nearly every day of her life, and continues to do so at the age of 91. And my dad did the same while he was living.

Consider something else here. God acts in behalf of Israel because of the pleasure He took in their mediator. “I will do it,” He said, “because I am pleased with *you* and I know you by name.” Friends, don't ever forget that our salvation is due to the pleasure God takes in our Mediator, Jesus Christ. He has done for us what Moses did for Israel, only more perfectly. He prays for us on the basis of His own standing before the Father. He asks God to accept us not because we're acceptable, but because He is. If you ever wonder how God could be pleased with you, sinner that you are, failure that you are, the answer is that God is pleased with Jesus, and therefore He is pleased with anyone who trusts in Jesus.

But Moses isn't quite through. There is one more thing he wants.

He longs to see God's glory. Verse 18: “Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory.’” Grasp this, friends! This is the same man to whom God spoke in a burning bush, the same one who brought the ten great plagues on Egypt by the power of God, the same one who has been up on Mt. Sinai seven times experiencing a degree of intimacy with God unknown since Adam walked with God in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden, the same one who regularly spoke to God face to face in the tent of meeting. And still he's not satisfied! “Now show me your glory.”

Moses is asking for something surpassing all former revelations of the glory of God. I believe his motive was that if his own personal fellowship with Yahweh was not growing and beyond all possibility of suspicion, his ability to mediate for his people will be less than adequate. And because his motives were pure, God agreed to grant his request—at least as far as the uncrossable gulf between the infinite and holy God and finite and sinful man would allow.

God meets Moses at his point of need. (19-23)

I confess that what is revealed here in verses 19-23 is divine mystery; it surpasses comprehension. I just know that Almighty God agreed to reveal more of Himself to a human being that at any time since the Fall and until the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, or since. God says to Moses in verse 19,

I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, Yahweh, in your presence. But, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.' Then the Lord said, 'There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.

We must understand, of course, that God is a spirit and does not have a physical body, so the references to God's face, hand, and back are all accommodations to human thinking. But they are not meaningless accommodations. These symbols all indicate that God is a person and He can be encountered in a personal way. The fact that Moses could see God's back, but not His face, indicates that there remains a gap between the infinite and the finite even in this instance. I'm reminded of the fact that whenever a solar eclipse occurs, people are warned not to look at it directly, even with sunglasses, for it can blind them. Rather they have to look at it only indirectly, in reality only gazing at the effects of it. God was willing to show as much of Himself as Moses could bear, but there were limits. Moses had to be protected *from God by God.*ⁱⁱ

But, more importantly, this account also indicates that a person who has a heart for God and seeks Him diligently can experience a more intimate relationship with Him than would ever be possible otherwise. Moses had this experience because He pursued God.

Do you realize how blessed we are today as compared to Moses? Jesus came so we could see God without filters. In John chapter 14 one of the disciples, Philip, said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." But Jesus said, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the father' Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" To know Jesus is to know the Father; to love Him is to love the Father; to see Him is to see the Father.

Conclusion: What is this passage saying to us today? To me it is saying above all else that my relationship with God must not be passive but active. A. W. Tozer wrote a powerful treatise entitled, *The Pursuit of God*. That ought to be the description of our spiritual journey—the pursuit of God. I'm not suggesting that He's playing hard to get and our lives must constitute a frantic search for spiritual meaning. Rather the point is that the distractions of the world are so great that we constantly, and often unconsciously, fend off the efforts of God to pursue us. He will not force His way into our lives, but He absolutely will respond to those who pursue Him diligently.

I want us to take a few moments here at the end of the service, as Laura/Karen come to play softly, to tell God what your heart's desire is.

Do you want to know God in a new and fresh way?

Do you want to see His power in your life?

Do you want to see His glory?

Do you want to understand His nature and character better?

Tell Him, plead with Him.

i. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 24-25.

ii. Philip Graham Ryden, *Exodus, Saved for God's Glory*, 1035.