

THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

"And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give you rest."
Exodus 33:14.

Through the centuries the Lord's people have longed for the assurance of God's presence with them. To this great longing God has responded graciously and generously with some of the precious promises in His Word.

As an example, we shall take the promise of God's presence which was spoken by the living God to His servant Moses at the time of a great crisis: "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

I. The Circumstances of This Promise.

This precious promise was spoken by God in connection with one of the most deplorable incidents in the wilderness journeyings of the Israelites

God had raised up Moses for the purpose of leading His people out of their bondage in Egypt into national freedom and blessing in Canaan. At the call of God and upon the constraint of duty, Moses had ventured his all, even life itself, on the accomplishment of that task, which proved to be much greater than he had anticipated. Under the direction of Moses, the Israelites had left Egypt, which to them was a place of toil, oppression and misery, and were journeying through the wilderness on their way to Canaan, which they believed was a place of freedom, abundance, rest and happiness. Their journey was one of varied experience some of which were delightful, and many of which were trying. As they journeyed, God manifested His presence with them by preserving, protecting and providing for them in wonderful and miraculous ways. Nevertheless, it was very difficult to liberate a people who did not want to be emancipated, and who seemingly had an incurable propensity to unbelief and disobedience.

At the supreme moment, while Moses was on Mount Sinai in communion with God, and receiving His commandments and His instructions with reference to the tabernacle, the people quickly turned to idolatry.

Even Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was to have been his coadjutor in the great enterprise, had broken down at the critical juncture and joined the people in making and worshiping an idol in the form of a golden calf. Their shameful apostasy was indeed a cause for bitter disappointment, righteous indignation and utter dejection.

When Moses descended the mountain and discovered that the people on whom he had set such high hopes had proved to be unfaithful, his disappointment must have been exceedingly great. Moses' first glimpse of their idolatrous obscenity quickly kindled his anger. Disappointed, disillusioned and disheartened, Moses dropped the tablets of the law from his trembling hands, and seized the wretched image, burned it in the fire, ground it into powder, scattered it upon the water and forced the Israelites to drink thereof.

Knowing that God had declared a breach between Himself and His people, due to their willful and terrible sins, this trained leader, who possessed a very keen foresight, could not see anything ahead except defeat, disintegration and disaster, and he resolved that this inevitable debacle must be averted at all costs.

In his dire need and sore distress Moses called upon God and said: "Show me now thy way." He desired advance information about the future. He wanted to know what opposition he would meet, what sorrows would come to him, and what joys he should expect. All who seek to know the future are doomed to disappointment because the future is sealed. It is better that such is the case. If we could know the successes and the joys which are in store for us, we might give up, become lazy and complacent, and destroy the very initiative and energy which are necessary to true success.

Those labors that transcended his skill, those disappointments that saddened his spirit, and those uncertainties that hung over his head like baffling clouds Moses carried directly and immediately to God. In response to his plea for the people, God suggested to Moses the possibility of substituting an angel for Himself, lest He might suddenly destroy the people because of their wickedness and rebellion against Him. Moses was reluctant to accept a substitute. He preferred to relinquish his task and die rather than to try to cope with the difficulties incident to the situation without the presence of God Himself. As splendid as it might be to have an angel to accompany him and his people, that would not please or satisfy Moses. To the contrary, Moses made it clear that, in the event that God would accompany him, no difficulty would ever baffle him, no danger would ever alarm him, and no obstacle would ever deter him. It is not surprising then that, in response to Moses' longing and praying for the assurance of God's presence with him and his people, God spoke the comforting promise: "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

Like Moses, all of us have our crises in life. These crises may come in various areas of life. A crisis may come through some personal failure, through some personal defect, through some disobedient act, through some desolating disappointment or heartbreaking sorrow, through some new task which demands more wisdom and strength than one possesses, or through some humanly incurable disease. When one of God's ministers, Henry F. Lyte, found that there was not any hope of his recovery from tuberculosis, he went into his study, faced what he considered an inevitable death and meditated on it, and then sat down and wrote these brave and beautiful words:

" I fear no foe with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where grave thy victory?
I triumph still, if THOU abide with me."

II. The Content of This Promise.

"My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." The first word in this precious promise is the pronoun "My." That priceless "My" pledges to us the side-by-side, step-by-step, heart-to-heart fellowship of God Himself.

"Take from me anything Thou wilt,
But go not Thou away;
And let the storm that does Thy will
Deal with me as it may."

Translated literally, the text reads, "My face shall go with thee." How richly expressive! It bespeaks intimacy of fellowship. He was to converse with One Who was strong enough to meet all of his needs for guidance and strength. What inspiration it brings to us! Well may the true Christian sing:

"O, the pure delight of a single hour
That before Thy throne I spend,
When I kneel in prayer, and with Thee, my God,
I commune as friend with friend!"

-- Fanny J. Crosby

This promise, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest," is not ambiguous, involved or hard to understand. It is unequivocal and clear. It is positive and certain..

1. Companionship.

The central fact in the history of Israel as a nation was the fact of the presence of God. The consciousness of the nation was attuned to the living reality of His personal presence in their midst. He was the One Who provided the moral constitution of the national life. It was the presence of God that determined the moral character of their conduct in every possible human relationship.

"My face shall go with thee." Besides suggesting close fellowship, this statement speaks of radiance. There cannot be any darkness in the life where regular communion with God keeps the soul bathed in the glorious light of the divine smile. "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Numbers 6:24-26).

"I have seen the face of Jesus,
Tell me not of aught beside,
I have seen the face of Jesus,
And my soul is satisfied."

If you will study the Bible, you will observe that precisely the same assurance came again and again to God's children who were ready to obey Him. Here is the word to Joshua: "As I was with Moses, so will I be with thee." The word to Gideon was: "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." To Jeremiah, trembling before his task and crying, "Ah, Lord God, I cannot speak, for I am a child," the answer came, "Be not afraid, for I am with thee." Weary and exhausted from his journeys, with perils round about him, Paul had a vision in the night, and heard a voice saying unto him: "Fear not, Paul, for I am with thee, and no man shall set upon thee to hurt thee. I have much people in this city." What a comfort to Paul was God's presence when the Apostle was tried before Nero! About that event Paul said: "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me" (II Timothy 4:16-17).

Years ago a Christian missionary, Felix of Nola, was being pursued by a hostile tribe. His strength was almost gone, and seeing a narrow cave he crawled into it, prayed for safety, and committed himself to the care of God. Scarcely had he entered when a spider began to weave a web across the entrance to the cave. Ere long his pursuers came, and were about to search the cavern when one of them noticed the spider's web, and said: "It is useless to enter there, for had he gone in he would surely have broken that web." They hastened on in search of him, and the servant of God escaped. God's resources are infinite and He sustains and protects His children.

How real God's presence has been to many others! It is wonderful that the vivid and supporting consciousness of His presence may be known by the most humble Christian. In no sense is this the exclusive portion of a privileged class. It is the joyous privilege of every child of God who really wants the companionship of the Lord.

The future is utterly unknown to each of us. At this point we must remain ignorant of the burdens we shall be called upon to bear, the troubles we shall meet, and the difficulties we shall encounter. None of us is capable of foretelling what sights we shall see, or what experiences we shall have. But, how stimulating it is to receive a promise of God's companionship! He says: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Christ said: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." The paths of life will change, but the partner and the presence will never change.

2. Rest.

How comforting is the second clause of the promise! "I will give thee rest." There are two kinds of rest. One is rest after toil, the lying down of the weary at the end of the day or at the end of the march or journey. The other is rest in toil, the internal and deep repose and liberty of a spirit, which has found a hidden refuge and retreat, where felling is calm and disengaged, while the march, the battle and the blimp are still in full sway. It was this latter kind of rest which was promised to Moses, not rest that we need. God's presence gives rest from doubts, fears, anxieties, dangers, toils, weariness and afflictions.

God's faithful and obedient child, who encounters the difficult and the unknown, is to have with him the divine presence, and is to enjoy not only support and assistance, but a wonderful rest.

III. The Consequences of This Promise.

"My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." These words are precious to believers, and especially to those who are faced with the inevitable changes of life; to whom the pressures of life become harder as the days pass by, and their need of God's presence becomes more and more indispensable.

Being a minister of Christ, and having had the experience of seeing people as they really are, and having been permitted for years to enter into the intimacies of their lives, even into the darkest moments that they ever experience, I have seen them struggle against the greatest odds imaginable and gain some wonderful victories because of God's presence with them. One thing that has impressed me greatly about some of those who have gone through the deep waters and ultimately won some great victories is the fact that they knew beyond a doubt that God was with them always. To know that God is with you gives you an assurance that you have the greatest source of strength a person can have.

"I am here,
By God's appointment,
In His keeping,
Under His training,
For His time."

Among the consequences of this promise of God's presence are three things which are invaluable.

1. Safety.

Here in the text is a promise to God's children that they will be guarded and protected in the future upon which they were entering. What a cheering word for the future! Israel had many trying experiences in the wilderness ahead, but God guarded, fed, protected and kept the people. His presence accompanied them, and guaranteed their safety.

2. Strength.

God's presence does not always keep us from temptations and trials, but it does guarantee our deliverance from them. Fortunate and blessed are we if God is with us when we encounter temptations. Human fellowship in the time of temptation is helpful, but it can only go so far. Christ goes all the way with us, and through Him we can overcome and conquer. The consciousness of His presence with us makes it impossible for temptations to overwhelm us or difficulties to discourage us. As Paul said: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us" (Philippians 4:13).

3. Satisfaction.

This world does not have the power to satisfy permanently. David said: "In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). Along the highway of Christian obedience God's presence accompanies those who travel it. Christ said: "Lo, I am with you alway." "With you alway!" Let those words soak into your inmost soul. "With you" in prosperity-- to keep you humble. "With you" in business -- to save it from a corroding secularism. "With you" in pleasure -- to make it wholesome. "With you" in your worship -- to make it as vital as a beating heart. "With you" in your work -- to make it worthwhile. "With you" in sorrow -- to brush away your tears. "With you" in life -- to make you strong. "With you" forever beyond death -- in that "land that is fairer than day."

God's presence with us is the highest blessing. Nothing else can be compared with it. It enriches all other blessings. It makes earthly blessings worth having. They are not the same to us without God's presence as they are with it. Every hour of every day we need the presence of God.

"I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me."

Let us practice the presence of God and then our pathways will be illumined with a divine light which will burn ever more brightly until we reach heaven. The need of this hour is that we shall all go with God. Do you want God to go with you? Are you willing to go with Him?