

GOD'S PRESENCE WITH US

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

There is one class of promises which has always had an especially tender appeal to the Lord's people. It is that large group in which we have the assurance of the Divine presence with us. If there is one thing more than another which the true servants of God have always longed to be quite sure about, it is this very thing, the Divine presence; and God has graciously responded in the many assurances given to us in His Word.

How wonderful are these promises of the Divine presence! They constitute one of the most comforting and edifying studies in the Bible. A mere glance at some of them is enough to fill the desponding heart with fresh courage and gladness. We discover still more the "exceeding great" riches which we possess in these promises when we ponder them carefully, examining their terms and considering the circumstances in which they were given.

As a specimen, let us take the promise given to Moses: "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." This promise is a benediction in itself, but it is when we take it with its context that its fuller graciousness and glory break upon us. However beautiful a jewel may be in itself, its beauty is enhanced by an appropriate setting. However lovely a full-blown rose may be in isolation, it has its loveliest look and fullest fragrance when it blooms in its native bower. So it is with this promise.

I. The Setting.

This promise was spoken to Moses in connection with one of the most deplorable incidents in the wilderness journeyings of Israel. God had raised up a deliverer to bring the people out from the groveling bondage of Egypt into national freedom and blessing in Canaan. He had accomplished their emancipation. He had demonstrated His presence with them by miraculous interventions, preserving, protecting and providing in wonderful ways. They were on their way to Canaan, a land of freedom, rest, plenty and happiness. Yet now, while Moses is in the mount receiving the commandments and the instructions regarding the Tabernacle, the people have "turned aside quickly" to idolatry and are dancing, naked, before the golden calf. Moses returns to the camp and sees the idol-worship in progress. The tables of the law drop from his trembling hands. He seizes the wretched image, burns it in the fire and then grinds it to powder. But, if the first sight of Israel's idolatrous obscenity kindles the anger of Moses, the thought of it afterwards dazes him with grief.

This promise was spoken to a disappointed man, a man in whose life there had suddenly come a disheartening disillusionment. The people on whom he had set such high hopes had proved faithless. The wrath of God burned against the stiff-necked idolaters. Poor Moses! His disappointment must have been great beyond our knowing. It was to him, at this particular time, that the comforting promise was spoken, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

Am I speaking now to some disappointed Christian? Did you start out with godly intentions and high hopes, but experience brought you disillusionment, denial, unexpected turns of frustration and disappointment with life? Is there an incurable, dull ache in your heart about the way things have transpired? If so, this promise is especially for you. "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." God delights to dwell with the disappointed that their sense of disappointment may be swallowed up in the super-abounding compensation of His heart-satisfying and rest-bringing sympathy and friendship. Disconsolate heart, seek the face of the sympathetic heavenly Father. He is wanting to be so real to you that disappointment shall be transformed into triumph by His realized presence.

When one of God's ministers, Henry F. Lyte, found there was no hope of his recovery from tuberculosis, he went into his study, looked death straight in the face and sat down to write the 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."

We, too, may triumph still because God has said, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

This promise was spoken to a discouraged man. Moses was a man whose great work for God seemed to be falling to pieces. How deeply discouraged he must have been! Not only had the people proved utterly undependable and perverted, three thousand Israelites fallen by the swords of their own brothers and the "tabernacle" been removed from the corrupted camp, but God Himself had indicated the withdrawal of His personal presence from the people. True, God had said that an angel shall lead the host, but an angel's presence without God Himself meant and means mere guidance without fellowship.

Am I even now speaking to some discouraged Christian? Have you been seeking for fuller spiritual life and victory, but somehow it has not come, and instead a recoil of depression has come over you? Discouraged child of God, this promise is especially for you, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." Are you looking to God to fulfil this promise to you, or are you doubting His tenderness and faithfulness? He loves you dearly. He bought you for Himself at the infinite cost of Calvary. He is really with you, and He wants to make His presence a living and bright reality in your experience. In the realization of His presence lies the secret of unfailing courage.

This promise was spoken to a very diffident man, a man bending beneath the weight of a great responsibility, feeling that his burden was more than he could bear and apprehensive about the future. Did ever a man carry a heavier burden than Moses? Is it surprising that above all else he longed for the assurance of the Divine presence with him? Going with the sense of responsibility there would likely be a sense of loneliness also. When God calls a man for special leadership and responsibility or for some deeper experience with Himself, it always means a certain loneliness. Loneliness has been a dreaded ordeal with many servants of God and has made them long for the compensating consciousness of the Lord's presence with them. To all who bear heavy burdens and to all who are lonely because of their attachment to the Lord Jesus, this promise comes with its heavenly cheer, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

II. The Statement.

The first word in this precious promise is the pronoun "My." Recognizing the emphasis on the pronoun here, the Septuagint Version translates it, "I Myself." That priceless "My" pledges to us the side-by-side, step-by-step, heart-to-heart fellowship of God Himself through all the way.

"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."

Look at the next word in the promise. "My presence shall go with thee." This meant far more than infallible superintendence from a distant heaven. It meant the close

companionship of One Who was enough to meet all of Moses' need for guidance and sustenance and strength. All sense of loneliness should be lost in the abiding presence of One Who is at the same time absolutely almighty and infinitely sympathetic.

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

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

"My face shall go with thee." Besides suggesting close fellowship, this expression speaks of radiance. There can be no darkness in that life where regular communion with God keeps the soul bathed in the glory-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."

"My face shall go with thee." Here, too, is the thought of the Divine approval and goodwill toward us. The face expresses the heart. Disapproval is often indicated by the turning away of the face. God's promise, "My face shall go with thee," indicates His gracious favor. The Divine favor is ever beaming upon the true Christian through the face of Jesus Christ.

Look at the certainty of the promise. It says, "My presence shall go with thee." God means that beyond a doubt He will be with each of us right through to the end. If God be with us, even death is disarmed of all dread. On his deathbed John Wesley exclaimed, "The best of all is GOD IS WITH US!"

"The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
He will not, He will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
He'll never, no never, no NEVER forsake!
He'll never, no never, no NEVER forsake!"

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 march. 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 feeling is calm and disengaged while the march, the battle and the climb are still in full course. It was this latter kind of rest which was promised to Moses, not rest after but rest in toil. This is the kind of rest that we need. God's presence gives rest from doubts, fears, anxieties, dangers, toils, weariness and afflictions.

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 truly worth having. They are not the same to us without it as they are with it. Every hour we need the protecting presence of our Lord.

"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."

This wondrous consciousness of God's presence is meant for every believer in Christ. It is in no sense the exclusive portion of a privileged class. God does not deal with us in that way. Let us practice the presence of God and then our pathways will be illumined with a Divine light which will burn ever more brightly unto the perfect day of heaven.