

Exodus 33 (3-4) – When Goals Become Gods

Many people go to church, pray, give, serve, and learn about God. But they are actually complacent about God. What they really want isn't really God. Their goals have become their god. Their desires are king. And those desires are keeping them away from a deeper relationship with God. And many of those people, even Christian people, don't even know it. Because they've never really had a deep, repentant relationship with God. And I dare say that many Christians don't even know what that means.

Now, you should have goals. And every person does have goals, even if they don't seem to work towards them. But you should. Getting your goals spelled out helps you. But you can have all your goals met and miss out on knowing God in the process. And knowing God must be the main goal. And the more you know God, the more that goal is the goal.

This chapter, Exodus 33, is about Israel's repentance and restoration. In the previous chapter, you see God's people, having been rescued and led out of Egyptian bondage, waiting on Moses to come down from the mountain and the presence of God with the Ten Commandments. And they grew impatient, rebelled against God, made an idol to worship, and got involved in all sorts of sinful activity. Moses came back down, and he broke the Ten Commandments, and the people were punished. It was a pretty bad scene.

So here, in the first six verses of Exodus 33, you see how their blatant, defiant, rebellious sin has caused God to take further action. God was still going to give them the Promised Land. But he wasn't going to be as close to them as he had been. God is omnipresent, and he wasn't going to abandon them. But they wouldn't know him and his presence in the same way. And as it was for them, your experience of God's love, joy, and peace can be lessened by your willful, stubborn, careless, complacent sin.

Your lack of desire for Jesus is manifest in the strength of your desire for other things. Even things Jesus can and does give to you. When Jesus was on

Earth, many people wanted him for the miracles in their life. But some people didn't want Jesus for himself. Even today, we look to Jesus to multiply our loaves and fishes, but we don't look to him for himself. But God, in his abundant mercy, reveals how disastrous this really is, and gives you the grace, the chance to turn around once again. And know him.

So, even though they had been wicked, God told Israel to go and possess the land, a place with abundant provision, and that an angel would drive out the inhabitants. They were going to have possessions (the land of Canaan), power (the angel going before them), prosperity (milk and honey), and even peace (enemies driven out). They would have all the gifts. All they had been promised. But there was one thing missing. It was the most important thing. And the people realized it. They would have everything they dreamed of, but God wasn't going to be with them.

In vs.3 and vs.5, God says that they were a "stiff necked" people. In other words, they had been stubbornly resisting God. Like a donkey resisting the farmer and making its neck stiff. And God said that if he stayed close to them in that rebellious state, it would be worse for them. So, he was going to distance himself. And they realized how bad the consequences were.

Vs.4 says – *When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.* The people realized that getting the Promised Land without God's presence was something to mourn about, not something to celebrate. They removed their ornaments, a sign of repentance. These ornaments were part of the spoil from Egypt. And they were part of what had made the golden idol they had been worshipping. Exodus 35:22 says these ornaments went to the building of the tabernacle. The very ornaments that could make a golden idol wound up dedicated to God. The gifts of God were no longer in service to themselves, but in service of God.

You see, once God revealed what the cost of their sin really was, they were willing to lose what they had gained, and they weren't willing to go without God no matter what they would gain. The people mourned for their sin

which had provoked God to withdraw from them. They knew that this was the worst punishment for their sin. This outward sign reflected the trouble in their hearts. They were repentant. True repentance happens when God shows you the true consequence of your sin. The consequence of a lesser knowledge of God. But people don't care as long as they still have stuff, and they don't lose stuff. But only when they lose stuff, then they turn to God. Or so they think. Because they don't know God all that well, if at all.

As a Christian, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But you can still practically ignore the Holy Spirit. And I am not talking about spiritual gifts. The Israelites were going to be filled full with spiritual gifts. But they were not going to be full of God. And the Bible promises Christians that God will never leave us or forsake us. But God's people can forget that God himself is the blessing. And they miss out on knowing him more deeply. They may be very blessed, and they may be going through the motions, but they lose the heart of it. They serve, they give, they learn. But they forget their first love. So, God causes them to see once again what's most important.

So, what are your goals? What are you asking God for? Because sometimes the worst thing that could happen to you is for God to give you what you've asked for. God was going to give them the Promised Land. But they came to the great realization, that to get the Promised Land without God's presence was something to mourn about, not something to celebrate.

Has God brought you to this place? Have you been shown how your carelessness and complacency has come between you and God? Be honest with yourself and with God. If you haven't really understood this, it's time to realize that God himself is the blessing. It's not about Jesus doing miracles for your life. It's about Jesus being in your life. You need to repent of wanting the gifts more than the Giver, if you want a deeper relationship with God.

Maybe your life is going great. You're getting your goals met. But you're deceived if you think you're on the right track because you're blessed, and you're without THE blessing. And maybe you don't know the difference.

However, maybe you're poor, in ill health, things are going bad, getting worse, no one seems to support you, and everyone seems lined up against you. Still, if you've got the presence of God with you, you have all you need, and a blessing beyond measure. Psalm 73:26 – *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* When I have Jesus, I have something money can't buy, poverty can't lose, no one can steal, death can't stop, and the devil can't touch. The closer I get to him, the more wonderful he is to me. If knowing Jesus isn't enough to motivate you, then you don't know Jesus. Or you don't know him like you think you do.

At this point, don't just beat yourself up and think you've got to do better. Have faith, and ask God to reveal your heart to you. Ask him to reveal how you've been deceived. Ask him to forgive you of your carelessness and complacency. And to give you the mercy and grace of true repentance.

People wear themselves out and worry themselves sick going after things in the wrong order. Now it isn't a sin to want to be blessed. But you could get everything you want, and you could have everything just the way you want it, and yet all the blessings in the world don't mean anything, if God isn't with you. If you're a Christian, God is *for* you. But is God *with* you?

Do you know what I mean? Many Christians don't. I'm not just talking about being saved. This is about the desire of your heart! If you're just playing at this, then you're just playing the fool. Read the Book of Ecclesiastes, and learn what Solomon found out, that all the things you can have and do are worth nothing without God. And you can have blessings *from* God and miss the blessing *of* God. The greatest blessing of God is knowing God. Is that what you really want? Do you really know the difference? Many don't. I'm not talking about a feeling. I'm talking about really knowing.

You can have all that anyone could want, but not have the presence of God. God could answer all your prayers and give you all your desires. You could be happy, healthy, and on your way to Heaven. But you can still be without the great realization of God with you. Someone can live in your house, but

still not be close with you. A church could grow in numbers, and its people be healthy, wealthy, and happy. It could give a lot to missions, and social action, all without knowing God. I'd rather struggle with all the problems a church could have, as long as we have the presence of God with us.

Let me elaborate. The presence of God isn't about feeling God in your physical senses, it's about knowing God in your spirit. And the Bible describes it as a love beyond knowledge (Ephesians 3:19), a joy inexpressible and filled with glory (1 Peter 1:8), and a peace that surpasses your understanding (Philippians 4:7). That is a living experience, not just in certain moments of life, but for the movement of life. Not just God parting the Red Sea, but guiding, guarding, and gifting you all along the way.

People sell the idea of God as a means to the Promised Land, but read Hebrews 11, and realize that God himself IS the Promised Land. God is my desire, God is my delight, and knowing God is my goal. That's the most essential thing. That's what I need in my life, that's what this church needs in its life, and that's what you need in your life, more than anything else.

Have you seen your idolatry? Have you suffered enough consequences? Do you realize that going on without the presence of God is the worst sort of consequence? Will you turn from your sin and turn to God? I'm not talking about chasing a feeling. Here is what I am saying in this message: making sure God is the focus of your life, with everything revolving around him, instead of everything revolving around you.

Let me ask you a question. What if God took everything away, but gave you a deeper relationship with him? Because when you lose your health, wealth, power, influence, possessions, position, prestige, reputation, respect, or loved ones, this makes you come face to face with what you really think about God. And your desire for his presence.

And that is when the devil comes calling. He wants you to seek satisfaction, security, and significance outside of God's revealed will. But Jesus is the

way, the truth, and the life, and God's plan of defense is to desire the truth, to know the truth, to believe the truth, to stand on the truth, and to obey the truth. That's how you tune in to God's frequency, and that's what resisting the devil is and what spiritual warfare is all about.

Which blessing do you want most? As for me, I'd rather be in the wilderness with God than in the Promised Land without him.

Now I'm sure you've heard the advice, "Put God first in your life." And it isn't necessarily bad advice. But it can be. You see, people tend to compartmentalize their spiritual life. God is a part, but he isn't the main factor in your decision making. So, you could put God first in some area, and then go and do what you intend to do, even against God's will. You could acknowledge God with some routine prayer, and then go and lie and cheat and steal after that. God was first, but you were still in control.

Sometimes, people have God on their agenda, but God isn't their agenda, and that is the issue. Don't put God first in your life. Endeavor to keep God at the center of your life, and let your life orbit around his will. And then you will more clearly see what should and shouldn't be in your life.

People might have good goals that are getting in the way of God. For example, you might start out with a good goal, like getting sober. And yes, Jesus will help you get sober. But you might wind up thinking that if Jesus helped me get sober, now I need to get my life back, or go for those things I know I want, or need. As if Jesus is your ladder to whatever you define as success. And as long as I have Jesus, I can get my other goals met as well.

You say, well, what wrong with that?! And I say thank you, because you have just proven my point. You don't need to get your life back. You need to live a new life. On God's terms, not your terms.

Those other goals may not be what Jesus wants for you right now. In fact, I know they aren't, whatever they may be. What Jesus wants for you, is for

you to want him, without having your other goals met. It's not about getting just enough Jesus to move ahead to the next thing. And then, when I really have enough Jesus, I'll be able to have what I want. No friend, that is a wrong pursuit. And it isn't that Jesus doesn't have good goals for you. But truly knowing Jesus as your lasting, all satisfying peace, this is the one goal above all else, regardless of all else. Even if you never get to have anything else.

The problem is that we think having those other things will give us peace, but they never really do. And even if they seem to give you peace, it is only for a little while. And then, they always want more, more, more.

You might really love Jesus. But Jesus wants to help you know him by rooting out the idols in your life. An idol is something you feel like you must have, something you can't live without. It's more than just something you want. It's something that disturbs your peace if you can't get it. And if you do get it, you think you'll finally have peace. But that peace never lasts. Because an idol always asks for more. Think carefully about that.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy that some people think of God as a means of gain. That godliness is simply a means to getting what we want, or that getting what we want is somehow the mark of godliness. And that kind of thinking will get in the way of your knowing Jesus.

Sin is like a chameleon. You desire one thing, and then it turns into another, and another, and you never have what you really want. True peace. And idolatry is what keeps moving the goalposts. People become discontent with life, because they aren't getting satisfied, and that's because Jesus has not become, or is not currently, their true, lasting, all satisfying peace. And they've never really understood what that means. Or they have forgotten what that means. And God is giving you the opportunity to turn around.

Peace is what you really want, and you're trying to get it with something and someone other than the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Even people who aren't Christians are looking for peace. They call it the pursuit of happiness.

And they think they can find it with things, or a sense of freedom which means they can do whatever they want. And they are slaves to themselves.

So, what can you do about it? Well, someone told me recently that the more you know, the less you need. And I say that's true about Jesus. The more he matters, the less having things matters. The less losing things matters. You turn your idolatrous neediness around by making your goal to have Jesus become your true, lasting, all satisfying peace. It can happen. No matter what else happens. You need a new goal. For a new you. And instead of trying to furiously row your boat to some other shore, this pursuit of Jesus can be like wind in your sails, as you keep knowing him in deeper, more satisfying ways. Ways that the loss of other things only amplifies. If you'll have faith to believe it.

Sometimes our goals become our gods. Idols have the power to hypnotize and deceive you. They guide you away from God and towards the goal itself. Make God your goal, make sure he is the focus of your life, with everything revolving around him, instead of everything revolving around you and your other goals. Get that stiffness out of your neck by getting on your knees.

And this is what Moses did. In vs.12-13, Moses intercedes for the people. And in vs.14-17, God promises that he would indeed go with the people, guiding them, guarding them, and gifting them, as he gathered them into the Promised Land. And then in vs.18 and following, Moses, having successfully interceded for the people, and having been told that he had found favor with God, asked for God to reveal himself and his glory to him. And in chapter 34, God grants Moses' request, and the Ten Commandments were reestablished, and God's covenant with his people was renewed.

In his mercy and grace, God is giving you the opportunity to know him. And knowing God is the essence of experiencing God's favor. Jesus said it this way, *"And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3)."* There is no better gift than God himself. So, let me ask you: How well do you actually know Jesus?