

God Be With You!

Fellow children of God,

Moses was in trouble. The Israelites, whom he was to lead, had sinned horribly against the Lord—turning from him, worshiping a statue they made. The people had repented, and God hadn't destroyed them as he'd threatened; yet he told them that his Presence would no longer be with them. Oh, he'd send an angel to help them in their battles, but the Lord himself wouldn't be in their camp. They'd have to get their strength, their courage and their conviction from something else.

Moses knew they wouldn't stand a chance—and not because of their enemies, but because of the sin that lay in themselves. Moses knew those Israelites would turn away from God again; he knew that he himself would fall into sin. Moses knew that there was only one source of help, only one way for them to make it through the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land. They had to cry out to God to come and live among them again. The Israelites didn't deserve that; if God would be with them, it would only be because of his grace.

We too pray for God's presence among us, with his strength and his love. For we need him, as much as those Israelites did 2500 years ago. And we ask God to be with all Christians, on their journey through the desert of life to the Promised Land of heaven. That's why Christians for centuries have spoken the blessing, "God be with you." It's not just a wish; it's a statement of fact—God is with you and will be with you. And so today I say, "God be with you!" As our lesson reminds us, you have found favor in God's sight; look forward to seeing God's face.

You may recall some of the events that led to the situation in Exodus 33. The Lord had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; now they had to travel across the Sinai Desert to the land flowing with milk and honey. God had them stop at Mt. Sinai, where he gave Moses the laws that would protect them. But while Moses was on the mountain for 40 days, the Israelites got caught up in the temptations of their sinful flesh—drunkenness, sexual immorality, leading to their casting a golden calf and falling into orgies of idolatry. When Moses returned, he directed the Levites to put to death the worst of the rebels; the rest suffered through a plague because of their sin. The people repented, in fact they took off all their ornaments, jewelry, anything festive, to show their sorrow over their sin.

God didn't destroy them; but he didn't come to dwell among them as he had previously. Moses put up a tent outside the Jewish camp, and that was where the Lord would meet him, with the pillar of cloud signifying his presence. The Israelites could see the cloud from afar, and they would stand outside their tents and worship the Lord. Yet God was still disciplining them, by not coming among them as he had.

Now Moses came to the Lord to attempt to restore the relationship. Moses had earlier begged God not to destroy the people; and, sad to say, Moses would have to intercede for them in the years ahead. But Moses was confident to do this because, as he says to God, "**You have said to me, 'I know you by name and you have found favor in my sight.'**" "In my sight": God had in essence looked down from heaven and been favorably disposed toward Moses. And in a few minutes Moses reminds the Lord that all

the people of Israel had found favor in his, that is God's, eyes. The Lord was pleased with them, even though they had done such wrong.

“They found favor in God's sight.” These particular words are only used a few times in the Bible. Noah was said to have found favor in God's sight, unlike the sinful people of his day. Mary was told by the angel that she had found favor with God, such favor that God chose her to be the mother of his Son. This is a truly wonderful picture: God looking down favorably on people like us.

But, when we hear these words, we naturally fall into a trap. We assume that, if we found favor in God's sight but other people didn't, it must be because we are better. We picture God like a Judge, or maybe like a professional sports scout looking over a sea of ballplayers and picking out me because of my abilities or my goodness. If God is pleased with me, I must have earned it.

But take a look at these people who found favor in God's sight. Moses was a murderer, whose sins are recorded for us in Scripture. Noah fell into drunkenness after the flood. The Israelites who found favor in God's sight had, just a few weeks before, built a golden calf to worship. These people weren't anywhere near perfect. And neither are we.

The pleasure God felt toward them was not due to their goodness; they couldn't be good enough to win God over. No, the favor they found in God's sight was because of God's grace. The Lord is loving and compassionate, forgiving sins for generation after generation—as God would explain about himself to Moses in the next chapter of Exodus. Moses appealed to God on the basis of God's loving promise. **“Consider that this nation is your people,”** he said, recalling the Lord's promise to be their God.

The goodness that won God over, made him favorably disposed, was not anything those Israelites did, any more that we could win God over by what we do. No, it is the goodness that God himself showed in Jesus. It was Jesus' keeping every law—that made God smile. It was Jesus' willingness to come to earth and suffer here for us—that forced the Father to love his Son. And when Jesus paid for all of our sins, and replaced those sins with his righteousness, then God became pleased with each of us. We find favor in God's sight because God looks at us through the blood of Jesus, our Savior.

In our Second Lesson, Paul noted the struggle he had with his own sins. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” he despaired. But he knew the answer: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Moses also knew where to go to find favor in God's sight. **“If I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so I may know you, so that I may find favor in your sight.”** Notice, Moses doesn't say, “Show me your ways so I can do better next time and earn your love.” He says, **“Show me your ways so that I may know you.”** It is as we get to know the Lord better, by studying his Word, by experiencing his love in worship, that we continue to find favor in his sight.

The first thing Moses asked for was to know God better—to be assured again of God's love. Then Moses asked for further blessings. As Moses did, so we too can look forward to seeing God's face.

When Moses made his first request, that is, to know God better, **“The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’** There wouldn't just be angels traveling ahead of the Israelite community; the Lord himself would be in their midst, strengthening them for their journey to the Promised Land.

The Lord has promised to be with us, too. And we need him, as we struggle with the difficulties of life. Some days it may be pain or trouble that have their claws on us, pulling us down to depression and away from God. Other days may be trouble-free, and that's when our proud spirits take over, leading us to think we're doing fine without God. As we sing in the hymn "Abide With Me," "I need thy presence every passing hour / What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?"

"My Presence will go with you," God promised. In fact, his words are even more amazing; the word translated "Presence" is the same Hebrew word for "face." "My face will go with you," God was in essence saying. He wasn't just making a pious reassurance, like we might say, "I'll be with you in spirit." No, God is really present with us. He is here now, as we gather in Jesus' name; and he is with us always, to the end of the age.

The Evangelist John reflected this Presence of God in describing the most amazing appearance of our Lord: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." When Jesus was on earth, God was visibly present among people—healing them with a word, stilling the storms of nature, raising the dead. This is the God who is with us; though we can't see him, he is here with all his power.

Moses knew what a blessing this was. **"If your Presence is not going to go with me, do not send us up from here,"** he said. It would be better to die in the desert than to try to travel through life without the Lord. I think of the words of an older member, now sainted, who repeatedly said that he couldn't see how anyone could get through a day of life without faith in Christ. Moses said, **"If your Presence is not going to go with me, do not send us up..."** and the Lord assured him, **"I will do this thing you have said, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."**

Then Moses asked for more. **"Please show me your glory."** Moses had heard God speak to him from a bush that was on fire but not burning up. Moses had seen God send ten plagues on Egypt. Moses had lifted his staff and the Lord had parted the Red Sea. Yet Moses knew he hadn't seen more than a glimpse of God's glory.

And that was for good reason. God said, **"You cannot see my face, for no human may see me and live."** Moses, a sinner, would be destroyed by the sight of God's full glory. God is perfect. His holiness would burn like a fire right through our sinful bodies and souls. Nothing sinful can stand in his Presence. That's why sinners fear death—the thought of coming before their perfect Creator fills them with terror. When Isaiah in a vision saw the Lord on his throne, he responded, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips... and my eyes have seen the King..."

Moses couldn't see God's full glory in this life. But God revealed enough about himself to get Moses through. **"I will make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord in your presence,"** emphasizing, **"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy."** God arranged for Moses to hide in a cleft in a rock cliff and get to see, not his face, but his back. Now God, of course is spirit, and doesn't have a body; but he was condescending to speak to Moses this way to explain what a privilege Moses would have in glimpsing a bit more of the Almighty's glory.

Martin Luther often spoke of the Lord as "the hidden God." God hides himself from us, because we couldn't bear to see him. God also hides himself so that we keep on looking for him. And he reveals little bits of himself so that we can know all we need to know about him. God speaks to us in his Word, the Bible; he tells us what to do and not

do, and tells us that Jesus has done it all for us. God shows himself at Baptisms, washing away sins by the power of his Word. God comes to us in bread and wine, so we can take him into ourselves and be personally assured of his love. God speaks through our pastor and through other Christians, who assure us we're forgiven.

Oh, there's much more to God than that. But for now, this is all we can handle; and these revelations are all we need on our journey through life. When we arrive at our destination, of course, the Promised Land of heaven, we will be cleansed of all traces of sin, and we will see the Lord and all his glory. For now, we are content with his Presence.

"God be with you": When I was young, my grandmother said that just about every time I left the house—she may have had some extra worries about me, but I think she said it to others, too. I have tried to use that phrase as a farewell, especially for those with special concerns, and I find myself saying it to my family members quite often. Some Christians shortened the phrase to "Godspeed," that is, God speed you on your journey, just as God was with the Israelites on their journey.

"God be with you," Christians have said to one another. We don't deserve it, as the Israelites didn't, but we have found favor in God's sight, and we look forward to seeing God's face. God be with you. Amen.