

THE LORD'S PRESENCE - Some thoughts for 2008

J.P. Thackway

"And he said, Certainly I will be with thee" (Exodus 3:12)

For Moses, this was the worst news he could receive: "Come ... and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). It was not that Moses was unpatriotic, or indifferent to Israel's sufferings. Forty years earlier the son of Pharaoh's daughter had tried to help their plight. In the self-confidence of an Egyptian prince, the would-be deliverer intervened to save a Hebrew slave (Exodus 2:11,12; cf v.19). Next day, however, when the deliverer-turned arbiter he accomplished nothing more than having to flee for his own safety (verses 13,14; cf Acts 7:25-28).

Shepherd

For the next four decades Moses was a shepherd in the land of Midian. It was a more gentle calling, and one that gave time for communion with God and learning of Him. It prepared him to be a shepherd to Israel (Psalm 77:20). Not one day of that appointed discipline was wasted. By now all the self-confidence of his Egyptian upbringing and prowess (Acts 7:22) has gone. This time he feels he is the last person to be Israel's deliverer and leader, "Who am I?" (Exodus 3:11).

Failure

There is nothing like personal failure to humble us. If it is sanctified, it can teach us a more realistic estimate of ourselves (Romans 12:3). Like the younger Moses, and Simon Peter afterwards, we are too sure of ourselves. By controlled failures, the Lord brings us down and teaches us our need of Him. We all have to be brought to where we say, "Without (thee) we can do nothing" (John 15:5). Our failures are God's teachers to qualify us for His service. If we learn from them like this, they are not negative but positive.

Promise

And it prepares us for the golden promise of verse 12, "Certainly I will be with thee." This assurance would mean everything to Moses now. It would be something for him to prove as he ventured forth to obey God. He is now most qualified to serve because he feels himself least so. A sense of inadequacy, but also a sense of divine sufficiency is the only safe way: "And who is sufficient for these things?" ... "our sufficiency is of God" (2 Corinthians 2:16; 3:5).

Let us look at this promise to Moses in verse 12, and see how the Lord can fulfil it for us in 2008.

1. It might seem to be misapplied

This promise is for Moses. He is the "thee" in "Certainly I will be with thee." Is it not misapplying these words to take them for ourselves this New Year? Some Christians have a problem with this - the use of the promises, especially when first given to individuals and specific to them. Let us consider this matter first.

1] We should remember what Paul wrote.

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4). And again, reviewing Israel's journeys through the wilderness, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: (or, models, types, patterns) and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). These at least confirm that such matters belong to us for *our* profit. The Lord's promised presence to Moses is included here, and is therefore something promised to us as well.

2] He is the unchanging God of the Covenant.

In Abraham's "seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). This blessing extended to Isaac and Jacob, and to Israel - and to Moses (Exodus 3:6). It is ultimately fulfilled in the single "seed" Christ (Galatians 3:16) and the elect in Him (Galatians 3:9). Therefore we share the promises made to the patriarchs and to Moses. Including God's assurance of His presence with them. "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death" (Psalm 48:14).

3] The New Testament confirms its application to us.

Consider how the Lord extended the promise to Moses' successor Joshua, "as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Joshua 1:5). But can it be further extended to us? Yes it can. In Hebrews 13:5 we read, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Those latter words are a direct citation of Joshua 1:5, which are an extension of Exodus 3:16! So we have apostolic authority for taking these words to Moses and seeing them as the Lord's words to us also. As John Owen reminds us, "It is a safe rule in interpreting scripture, that in places mentioning the love and grace of God to us, the words are to be taken in their utmost significance."

We acknowledge that not *everything* promised to Moses in these words can apply to us, for example his power to work miracles before Pharaoh and for Israel. Nonetheless, the promise of God's gracious presence in a way adapted to us is included. As Samuel Clarke in his *Scripture Promises* (1854) expressed it: "Whatsoever promises are made, in scripture, to particular persons, in cases, and for reasons, that equally concern other good men, they are applicable to the comfort of all, and may be pleaded with faith and prayer."

2. This promise is full of comfort for us

Moses must deliver a message to Pharaoh (Exodus 3:18). Moses will be no match for the king of Egypt. But it will not be Pharaoh versus Moses, but Pharaoh versus Moses + Another. That makes it no contest, and Moses has no need to fear. Trusting this promise, no matter what we have to face, it is always I + Another.

In this passage, Exodus 3:5ff, the Lord shows us what He is like. It gives us a view of the Promiser in His revealed character. Seeing the Promiser behind the promise helps us to take it to ourselves.

1] He is holy.

"The place whereon thou standest is holy ground ... Moses hid his face" (verses 5,6). Consciousness of God's holiness not only lends a seriousness to our religion - it also helps confirm His faithfulness for us. He cannot lie (Jude verse 1) and therefore He must keep His word, "Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David" (Psalm 89:35).

We can use all God's attributes for our comfort this way. Applied to all the promises they buttress them in our minds. For example, since He is **omnipotent**, He *can* fulfil His promises. He is **all-wise** and therefore *knows how* to fulfil them. He is **love** and therefore He *wants to* this for our sakes. He is **holy**, and therefore is *bound to* be better than His word. No wonder, then, He says, "*Certainly* I will be with thee."

2] He is in full sympathy with His people.

"I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt ... have heard their cry ... I know their sorrows" (verse 7). What we feel here is felt by a kind Father in heaven, "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9). As such, He will fulfil His promised presence with Moses, and with us.

Think particularly of that beautiful phrase, "I know their sorrows." Jehovah was no indifferent spectator. He understood experientially all they were suffering all the while. The word "know" is the same as in Genesis 18:19 concerning Abraham, "For I know him." "He 'knows' Abraham;

He cared for him in the sense that He chose him from among other men and saw to it that certain things happened to him. The emphasis is on the fact that God 'knew' him intimately and personally" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers). In this way, the Lord knows *your* sorrows too. This moves Him to say to Moses for Israel's sake, and for our sakes, "Certainly I will be with thee" (cf John 16:18).

3] He is a God who determines the end or goal.

"And I am come down to deliver them..." (verse 8). There is no discrepancy with what He says later, "When thou hast brought the people out of Egypt" (verse 12). God will do the work, but through Moses as the instrument. And He speaks of the exodus with the certainty of divine confidence, "When." It is as good as done already. Nothing can stop it happening. This is because "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). To have such a One with us is to be on the victory side. It is His work more than it is ours (cf Mark 16:20).

3. How is this promise fulfilled?

1] Sometimes it is through setbacks.

"I will send thee unto Pharaoh" (verse 10). Moses eventually went, with Aaron for support. However, as chapter 5 tells us, it all went horribly wrong. Instead of setting the Israelites free, Pharaoh increases their bondage (5:2-9). Moses and Aaron are blamed (5:19-21). And they are left with how to reconcile God's *promise* with His *providence*. God has not acted like He led Moses to expect.

Nevertheless, this does not mean he should not have gone. Sometimes the way of obedience involves unexpected setbacks and disasters. The Lord can take this way to accomplish His will. Let us be clear on this: because something has gone wrong it does not necessarily mean we are out of the right way. Our Lord commanded the disciples to cross the lake, but winds and waves hit their boat part way. They were doing the Master's will nonetheless - and would know more of the Master as He stilled that storm. So the Lord has things to teach us through such apparent reverses (cf Exodus 6:1).

2] Sometimes it is through preventing mercy.

There is so much the Lord can shield us from and spare us if He please. I once knew a godly man called William Harris who lived to be 106 and who served in the Navy in the Great War. Aboard a battleship in the North Sea, all hands were summoned on deck because an enemy ship was sighted. Such action could be frightening in the winter seas. As he and a fellow Christian ran to duty, his friend turned and said, "Cheer up Willie, the Lord is with us." As the guns were prepared for firing it was found the muzzles were totally iced over. The same was so for the enemy battleship, and the two passed each other harmlessly.

3] Always it is by helping us through.

The Lord pledged this to Moses by saying, "...and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou has brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain" (verse 12b). He was now at Mount Horeb or Sinai (verse 1). The Lord says that he will one day be here again with all this people that he will bring out of Egypt. This is the assurance that he is the Lord's sent servant and will be helped to accomplish this.

So it proved to be and happened exactly as God promised. Moses grew in stature and God-confidence. Pharaoh quailed before the relentless succession of plagues. In the end all the Egyptians feared him (Exodus 11:3), and they with their king could not urge the Israelites to leave quickly enough or recompensed enough (12:31-36). By ch.19:1,2 Moses leads the people to the foot of this very mountain and there they camped and served God for a year before moving onwards toward Canaan. Moses was greatly helped, all the difficulties were overcome. When God says "certainly," we may be certain of it also.

In all our concerns and needs, then, let us count on this promise. It is in the same wonderful vein as others we can plead. Here are some of them,

"And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed" (Deuteronomy 31:8).

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10).

"For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee" (Isa 41:13).

"Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matthew 28:20).

Concerning the last of these, Chrysostom said, "I have a pledge from Christ - have His note of hand - which is my support, my refuge and haven; and though the world should rage, to this security I cling. How reads it? 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' If Christ be with me, what shall I fear? If He is mine, all the powers of earth to me are nothing more than a spider's web."

Let us venture on this promise then, for all that lies before us this New Year. It is not so much what this year holds for us, as Who holds all things for us in this New Year. As we go, Jehovah comes. As we seek to do His will, His presence and help will "certainly" be ours.

Moses' life of 120 years breaks conveniently into 3 parts: his 40 years' training in Egypt, his 40 years in Midian and his 40 years leading Israel out of Egypt to the borders of Canaan. Someone has said that he "spent 40 years becoming a somebody, 40 years becoming a nobody, and 40 years discovering what God could do with a nobody." In principle, may this be our discovery also.