

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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Exodus 33**

[Excerpts from videos on prayer.]

- I describe prayer as my privilege and obligation, communicating with God.
- Prayer is nothing more than a conversation with God.
- It can be formal or informal. It doesn't have to be fancy or rehearsed.
- It's instant. It's a gut-level response.
- Talking with God in any fashion.
- I don't think there is a right way to pray. It's a conversation between you and God.
- I just feel drawn to Him.
- A constant communication with God. It's as close as your breath.
- Sometimes words aren't even uttered.
- I can just think with my heart and He hears me.
- It can be anything and God will still listen to you.
- When I walk, I pray constantly.
- And it's usually in the car while I'm driving.
- I love a long commute.
- I pray a lot in the car while I'm driving, thinking about things. I feel like I'm always on the go.
- I go into the bathroom and I pray in there sometimes.
- I can talk to God any time about anything and He's willing to listen.

- As I develop in my faith as an adult, it's kind of a struggle to learn to pray.
- The first few times I fell sleep, you know. My mind would kind of wander.
- It is really hard to pray with four kids under six years of age.
- Sometimes I have to just sit myself down and say, hey, you're going to pray now. Like, sometimes I feel that my prayers are really selfish.
- The hardest time to pray is when your hands are dirty and you've got mud all over your face and you come to God and you think He doesn't want to see you.
- It's almost like when you've got a grudge against somebody. You don't want to see them.
- The blocks that I have I think would be when I'm frustrated, when I'm down about situations in my life.

[Video ends. To view, see link below]

I guess I wouldn't trust it if it was just preachers talking about prayer. This needs to be something that we *all* live with and like and struggle with.

It's got to be more than ten years ago now. I was going into a health club in the middle of the winter. I desperately needed the health club. It had a double set of doors and on the way out was a woman. I held the door open for her so she could go by because it was cold outside and she gets to the door and stops and looks at me and says, "Are you that priest?" Is that ever a good sign? "Are you that priest?" I said, "Well, yeah." I wanted to show her the picture of the kids but that wasn't what she was asking. What she was really asking underneath was, "Do you know something about God?" She stopped right there in the middle as the wind was whistling into the building and she said, "I need to come in and talk to you. My husband is dying and we've tried everything. We've gone to all the doctors and we've had prayer services and they've anointed him with oil. I even started going to church again. He's still dying and I've got to tell you, Father, I am mad. I'm mad at God. He doesn't seem to show up. I'm mad at the church. They don't seem to be able to do anything. I'm mad at myself because if I'd only started praying sooner, if I could pray better, this wouldn't be happening. What should I do?"

How do you answer that in the doors of the health club? And so I mumbled something and gave her my card and said, "I'd be delighted to talk with you about this." I never heard from her again—and I've wondered. When I talk about prayer, I think about that woman and about how alone and frustrated she felt. I think about another person who felt alone even in the middle of the crowd. He was stuck in that same kind of situation, feeling like God was not answering his prayers. The other person was famous. His name was Moses. [Slide shown.] That's not Moses, that's Charlton Heston. Moses would like to have looked like that.

What this woman at the health club and Moses had in common was that they were both being torn apart out in the wilderness. They were both being shaped out there where life is hard and uncertain, when the praying that you do seems to be coming back *address unknown*. Everybody spends time out in the wilderness. These days, between racial strife and sick bodies and broken minds and bitter politics and tough economics and refugees flooding the borders, our nation and our community have been in the wilderness and that's just us as a people. Then there are you and your relationships and your stages of life and your health or lack of it. Every individual in this room is spending, or will soon spend, time in the wilderness or you've been there in the past. That's when we either experience a collapse of our churchy faith, "I knew it wasn't going to do me any good; it's like you are buying credits with God by showing up in church" or you learn to pray in a whole different way. That's what I'd like to talk about this fall, learning to pray in a very non-churchy way.

Moses spends two-thirds of his life out in the wilderness. The first 40 years look really good. He's in the palaces of Egypt, hot and cold running slaves. There's a god on every corner that he can talk to. Then he has to run away and he spends the next 40 years as a shepherd out in the wilderness with sheep. The last 40 years of his life is where this part of the story comes in. This time he's leading hundreds of thousands of people who have just escaped being slaves in Egypt out into the wilderness. He fights with a stiff-necked people who won't do what God wants. They have been slaves so long that they have forgotten about God. God keeps leading them deeper and deeper into the wilderness. I think that's when prayer really becomes prayer.

Listen to this prayer. It takes place right after in the most famous scene of Cecil B. DeMille's movie *The Ten Commandments*. Remember it? Moses has just split the Red Sea and the people streamed across and watched Pharaoh's army drown behind them. They go into the wilderness and Moses says, "You guys wait here" and he goes up to the top of the mountain right next to the Promised Land to get the Ten Commandments. When Moses comes down, he sees the people having an orgy. In his absence, the people have turned back to the pagan gods and are worshipping them to celebrate that they are safe. Moses is furious, he throws the tablets on the ground, and the judgment of God comes on the people. Thirty thousand Israelites are killed that day.

They are not yet at the Promised Land; they are in the wilderness. This is what happens the next day and for years to come. Moses is furious with the people. It doesn't sound like God is too happy either. And the people are terrified. That's when this very next incident takes place. From Exodus, chapter 33, starting in verse 7:

<sup>7</sup> Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. <sup>8</sup> And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. <sup>9</sup> As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. <sup>10</sup> Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent. <sup>11</sup> The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

Then down to verse 12.

<sup>12</sup> Moses said to the LORD, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ <sup>13</sup> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

In other words, Moses does not want to blow this.

<sup>14</sup> The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” <sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. <sup>16</sup> How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” <sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Twice Moses hears God say, “I love you and I know you by name.” God knows each of our names, each of our hearts, maybe even especially when we don’t feel it. The passage goes on.

<sup>18</sup> Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

Moses is saying, “You know me, now let me know You.”

<sup>19</sup> And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. <sup>20</sup> But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” <sup>21</sup> Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. <sup>22</sup> When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

It says that when that happened, the face of Moses glowed like a lamp from the sight. When he came down from the mountain, the people were amazed. Is that your interaction with God? Do you talk to God like that? Does God talk to you like that? Does your face glow after you’ve interacted with the invisible God? Sometimes after I pray, my face glows. It is red with anger. Or it is white with fear or my face goes gray with guilt. But I don’t glow and I don’t see many of you looking like lightbulbs either.

A couple thousand years ago there was a hermit named Basil, Basil the Hermit. It was said of Basil that his life was like lightning, meaning because his prayers were like thunder. My prayers at best are like a little firecracker, but for me the neatest verse in this passage, in the whole Old Testament, really, is verse 11.

<sup>11</sup> The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

That’s what I want! I want that for you, too. I don’t want you to be afraid of God. I don’t want God to be a stranger to you. I would like you to have a relationship with God, a sense of intimacy. I’ve got to tell you that comes only after long years of spending time with God. You can have ecstatic moments, but the sense that God is really there only comes over time in the wilderness.

The Tent of Meeting was just one place where Moses went to meet God. For Moses, it was not just in that specific tent out there, although it was neat to have a special place with the sole purpose of being a place to go and concentrate on being with God. In our old house, my wife had this rocking chair and when I would see her sitting in that chair, I would know not to ask for the ice cream because she was trying to pray to God. Sometimes you need to find your own place where you say, "I'm going to go talk to God." I have a friend who would drive 35 minutes every day each way to Edina, and he would say this was great for him because on the way in, he would pray for the people at work, his coworkers, and on the way back home, he would pray for his family. Each of us needs to find our own place. Perhaps for me, it is a walk. For some of you, it's the shower. Moses had a tent and called it the Tent of Meeting. Anyone could go there, but when Moses went in the tent, all the people would stand up because they knew something special was happening.

I think that when you pray in the wilderness, you need to find lessons you can bring back home. **Here are three lessons for those of us who have a hard time hearing God.** The first lesson is in verse 13 of the passage. Moses says,

<sup>13</sup> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.

Moses presumes that God loves him because God has just delivered him from slavery in Egypt through the miracle of the Red Sea. God has offered the Ten Commandments but Moses says, "If You really continue to love me, then teach me Your ways." The first part of prayer is saying to God, "Show me what You want. Teach me Your ways." Moses has a sense that God's ways are different from Egyptian ways, different from slaves' ways.

Moses has many ways. Moses is multicultural. He grew up in the courts of Egypt. He got married in the cave of a shepherd and now he's leading a slave rebellion. Three different ways of life. Your way is sort of your cultural understanding of God. He says, "I know I'm not supposed to live the Egyptian ways or the slave ways. Teach me Your ways because Your ways are different from Egypt's ways. Your ways are different from slaves' ways. Your ways are different from America's ways." Wait, wait! Is that in the Bible? It should be. "Teach me Your ways" means that the ways of America are not always the same as God's.

I'm not one of those who is a culture basher. I don't mean we should say, "Oh, they are the enemy out there. We're the only holy ones. They're screwed up." But so are we, and what we need to see is that our culture, our way of life, often sets us up not to hear God's voice. We need to be able to discern what honors God and what leads people away from God. In soul, in body, in mind, I am every day soaked in the ways of this culture, this racialized, powerized, Twitter-ized, sexualized, video-ized, speed-ized society. From the moment I wake up to the sound of an alarm to when I lie in bed at night. Moses turns to God and says, "Teach me Your ways so that no matter where I am, I can know that I am living in a way that pleases You. I want to know how You think, God."

So that's how it starts. Prayer really starts by saying to God, "Show me what You want. Teach me Your ways." How do you learn that? **The first lesson is that we get to know God's ways when we read God's Word**, especially when we read God's Word together. As we study God's

Word together, God speaks to us. I am praying for the start of our adult Bible studies and for the start of BSF [Bible Study Fellowship] and CBS [Community Bible Study] this month.

I think they are great things, but I've got to tell you, the danger there is that when we study the Bible, we turn it from a conversation with God into an academic study. Or we turn it from a place where God is teaching us something to just checking off the assignment and Tuesday is done. I had a professor in seminary once who said, "I wake up in the morning and I pray that this will not go from my notes to your notes without going through the heart of at least one of us." "Teach me Your ways" means, "God, speak to me out of Your Word."

The second way I think God teaches us His ways is **when we spend time with God's people**. If you want to get to know God's ways, get to know God's people when they are trying to act like God's people. Not just when we are at the Vikings game, not just when we are at the party. When we gather together and say, "What would God want us to do together?" When I get to know God's people, they teach me God's ways, especially when we pray together.

The third way I think God teaches us His ways is **when we do God's work**. Hear God's Word. Be with God's people. Do God's work. Sometimes you cannot learn God's ways when you keep standing here because you have to walk over *there* and then, "Oh, I can see it." But you could stay here forever and never see it because it's blocked. When we do God's work, it changes our perspective and it changes us. Some of you are here and that's a great first step. Then you need to take the next step and say, "God, is there something You want me to do?" It will look different for every one of you. For some of you, it may be the mission trip. For others of you, it may be tutoring. For some of you, it may just be helping somebody with their homework. "Teach me Your ways" may be helping the poor or holding the babies at church or a Bible study at work or asking a friend to take a walk, reaching out to repair a relationship. The work of God done by the people of God instructed by the Word of God teaches us the ways of God.

When Moses says, "Teach me Your ways if You love me," he is saying, "Teach me Your ways so that I can stay on track with you." The first thing that Moses is asking for out in the wilderness is to **become a little more like God**. What happens if we learn the ways of God? Well, the first thing that happens is we become a little more *like* God, don't we? You don't start to think that you are God. That's a different sermon. But when we follow the ways of Jesus, we start to become a little more like Jesus. Our prayers may not start to sound like thunder. Our faces may not glow, but maybe people can see a little change.

I have a friend who is a dad of a four-year-old. He called me the other day and I said, "What's up?" He says, "Best day of my life." "What do you mean?" He said, "I was doing one of those 'I'll take the four-year-old, you take the other six kids.' I was doing my part as a dad and we're playing and goofing off and in the shop and just going through the day. All of a sudden for some reason, I turned around and I gave him a hug and said, 'I love you, Son.'" He said, "For the rest of the day, my son was about a step-and-a-half behind me." He said, "I'm just like Daddy. When I grow up, I'm going to be just like Dad." When we learn the ways of God, that's how God feels. He said that was the highlight of his whole month that his son wanted to be just like him. When we follow somebody else in their ways, we become like them. That's how we show our love for God and how God speaks to us. "Teach me Your ways."

The second thing that Moses asks for out in the wilderness is found in verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.

“How will anybody know that You are pleased with me and Your people unless You go with us? If You don’t go with us, we’re not going anywhere.” Now remember, they have just crossed the Red Sea to go toward the land that God has promised them. God was with them. He split the sea. “How do we know that anybody will love us unless you go with us? What else distinguishes us from all the other people on earth unless You are with us?” Why would Moses think that God wouldn’t go with them now? Well, it’s because of what happened a little bit before, this orgy, this abandonment of God. It has obviously angered God. In verse 3, it says,

<sup>3</sup> Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Just for a second, does that sound like God is a parent with teenagers? I’m just saying. Do you have a sense that this is a teenager with parents? There are times we are so furious with each other that we never want to see each other again. Moses knows that that is the way of death. Moses knows that unless God is with him, he will be no different from anybody else. The second thing Moses asks for out in the wilderness is **the presence of God to give guidance and help**. And most of all, the presence of God gives us the kind of love that lets us go out into a dangerous world. Moses knows that if God doesn’t go with them, then the love of God doesn’t go with them. And if the love of God doesn’t go with them, they start destroying each other.

It’s like the little boy with his mom. His mom says, “Honey, go in the cupboard and get a can of chicken soup.” The little boy says, “I can’t go in there, Mom, because it’s dark. At the other end of the kitchen his mom says, “It’s okay, honey, Jesus will be in there with you.” The kid walks to the door of the cupboard and goes, “Hey, Jesus, throw out some chicken soup, will you?”

This is a reminder that we usually want God to bless our plans instead of saying, “God, show me Your ways” and then following God. When we walk out into this very scary wilderness of our own, we *should* be afraid. What Moses insists on here is that God would send the assurance that He will be with us forever. Do you have the sense that God is with you? At hard times at school? At terrifying times at home? Or is God only here? Moses says, ‘Unless You go with me, I’m not leaving.’ You and I should want the same thing because when we are in that scary place in the wilderness, the only thing that makes any difference in our lives is if God is with us.

I’ve been struck by the idea that when God says to Moses, “I am with you,” it really is not always good news in the sense that we think of good news. Gary Haugen, the head of International Justice Mission, has preached here a couple of times. The last time he was here, he said something that I wrote down. He said, “Here is one choice our Father wants us to understand as Christians and this is the choice of our age. Do we want to be brave or do we want to be safe? Our Heavenly Father wants us to know that we simply cannot be both.” You could be safe and not go anywhere and not do anything and not be any different, or you can be brave and God will go with you but you will be scared. God wants His children to become brave and promises to go with us far beyond safety. Are you thinking that you are with God because you are stopped here and you’re not going anywhere because God won’t go with you? God wants you to become brave and take that next step. “Teach me Your ways and go with me.”

The third thing that Moses asks for out in the wilderness is something we don't talk about a lot. We really don't have the language for it.

<sup>18</sup> Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

Moses turns to God and says, "Okay, I'll learn Your ways and I know You're with me but, God, show me Your Glory." What Moses really means is "**Show me who You really are.**" Moses is saying, "God, I put all of my chips in this desperate gamble that these slaves are not going to turn on me and kill me. The Egyptians aren't going to come out and capture me and kill me. We are not all going to die here out here in the wilderness. I've done this, God. I'm willing to keep going but show me who You really are. Just give me a glimpse, will you please? Just a glimpse." Sometimes we need a glimpse.

Those of you who are a little older, do you remember how the old Soviet Union used to celebrate its power on May Day by having a huge parade through Red Square at the Kremlin? They would have armies and tanks and missiles in the parade so the folks in charge of the Kremlin could take pictures and say, "This is what we are like. Don't ever forget it." That's a little of what Moses wants. "God, I'm scared. These giants are really big. Show me that You're bigger, would You, please? Show me."

Do you need the assurance today that God is not only there but is more powerful than money? Do you need the assurance that God can do more for you than doctors? Do you believe down in your gut that of all the paths that woo you, the way of God is the only path to eternal life? Moses is asking for that assurance here. It's a mystery but "Give me a glimpse. Show me Your glory." God shows up, but as with a mystery, in a glimpse.

God's glory shows up for people who are learning His ways and choosing to be brave and follow Him instead of staying safe with religious knowledge. When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting, people saw the Glory of God in a cloud coming down and they said, "God is there. I believe in God because God is there. He talks to Moses." How do we see it?

John Calvin was one of the authors of what we call The Reformation. Calvin says, "I love the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but I believe that God has written a fifth Gospel, the Gospel of nature." When I walk through nature, I see the goodness of God. Some of us sense the goodness of God in singing at worship. Usually we see the Glory of God in the rearview mirror when we look back and see how God was with us in times beyond our strength. If you want to see God, get to a place where you can be quiet and then look at something like this.

[Slide shown.]

These are called the Pillars of Creation. They are clouds of dust. God seemed to have had some extra material and just threw it away and we call it the Pillars of Creation. They are each 100 times bigger than our solar system. When I see that, I go, "God, You are a lot bigger than my ingrown toenail, aren't You? You are powerful, aren't You, God. God, show me Your Glory." When Moses went to bed at night looking at the stars, he may have caught a glimpse of the Glory of God. You and I who follow not Moses, but who follow Jesus, we have another view of the Glory of God. It says that at one point in human history, God became man. John the apostle says,

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth [John 1:14].

Our God takes on human skin and shows us the Glory of God by hanging on the cross and saying, “This is how much I love you. I will never leave you.” That’s when we learn to pray in the wilderness. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we are meeting in one of these tents, the Tent of Meeting, and we ask that You would teach us Your ways. Reassure us of Your presence and Your love by wrapping Your arms of love around us. We ask that with our faltering little prayers, You would give us a glimpse that You are the only God. We ask that with that comfort, we would see You, that You and You alone would be our vision. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <https://vimeo.com/139222109>

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*