

INTRODUCTION

Do you believe aliens exist? There is no Biblical support for it or against it. The Bible was written for us human beings to read. However, personally, I find it hard to imagine that our earth is the only planet in the whole universe that has living things. I do not think that God created the stars just for us to observe at night, or for the superstitious people to write about horoscope. I love sci-fi movies. Aliens are often portrayed as vicious creatures trying to conquer and destroy the human race. However, in 1977, the movie “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” described how some friendly aliens reaching out to people. The two sides used music and flashing lights to communicate. Toward the end, the main character was welcomed into a spaceship. That would truly be an out of this world adventure. I wonder if it looked anything close to that when God appeared to people in the Bible. In our passage today, Moses had a fascinating experience to see God’s glory. In last week’s message the Israelites sinned by worshipping a golden calf. Moses pleaded for God’s mercy. God was faithful to keep His promises to bless the Israelites. However, sin affected God’s relationship with His people. God told Moses that He would not go with the Israelites into the Promised Land. It was a shocking news to Moses and his people. How could they accomplish the goal if God was not with them? Once again, Moses asked the Lord to change His decision. In Moses’ mind the most important thing was not getting the job done but to get it done with God. It is the same for us. What is your plan for next month, next year or the next five years? No matter what it is we need God to lead our way.

EXPLANATION

1. Interruption 影響

The sin of the Israelites caused an interruption to their relationship with God. The promise of Canaan remained unchanged. God said to Moses in **verses 1-2**: 1 ...“Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ 2 I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.” God would continue to be faithful despite the sinfulness of His people. It was an unconditional promise. After all, that was the reason why God took them out of Egypt. They would not live in the wilderness forever. Canaan would be their future home. God told them that He would send an angel to lead their way. The word “angel” can be understood as a messenger. Up to this point, nothing was new to Moses. God told Moses the same arrangement in **23:20** when he was still on Mount Saini: “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.” An angel was God’s agent to convey His message or to carry out His command. What was changed is in **verse 3**: “...But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.” God told them explicitly that He would not be with them anymore. His absence was actually an act of grace, lest His anger would consume the people next time they sinned. Therefore, God sent an angel to replace Himself. It is like a Head Coach assigning his assistant to supervise a team for a game. It would affect the morale of the group. God wanted the Israelites to realize the seriousness of their sin. They

abandoned God and turned to worship an idol. God indeed listened to Moses' plea and forgave their sin. However, they did not show any regret for what they had done. It was not until Moses told the Israelites the bad news that God would no longer be with them, then they began to get nervous. A guy might not realize how badly his silly mistake has hurt his girl-friend. It was not until the lady told him: "I think you should go watch the movie by yourself." If he still did not get the message, then he was truly dumb. **Verse 4** tells us the reaction of the Israelites: When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. They removed their ornaments, which might include any jewelry, from their bodies. When people showed true mourning in their hearts, any fancy clothing accessories did not seem to be appropriate. Sin would not cut off God's relationship with His people. However, sin would interrupt the fellowship. God looked for Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit. Remember how Adam reacted when he heard God's footsteps? Adam said to God in **Genesis 3:10**: ... "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." Adam was like a kid stealing cookies from a jar. Mom knew exactly what was going on when she said: "Little mouse, what are you doing in the kitchen?" Johnny quickly ran behind the curtain. It is true that God is always willing to forgive us when we confess our sins. However, confession should be more than a simple "I am sorry." We should feel the weight of our wrongdoing because sin interrupts our fellowship with God. We do not want to pick up the Bible. We lack the interest of coming to church. We sense the guilt and shame even when others mention about God. We need to take action to repair the relationship. We should be like the main character in the parable of the prodigal son. The younger brother felt the remorse in his heart that he had sinned against his father and God. He decided to turn back from sin and turn to his father. Sincere repentance is about a disgust over sin and a longing to restore harmony with God.

2. Interaction 交誼

Now the Israelites felt an interruption in their relationship with the Lord. In contrast, Moses maintained a close interaction with God. He was still the mediator for the people. Look at **verse 7**: 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. The phrase "tent of meeting" can be referred to a camp that the Israelites lived in, or the tabernacle. But the tabernacle was not built until chapter 36. This tent could be a physical structure for people to see where Moses met with God. Notice that this tent was erected outside of the camp. If anyone wanted to inquire of God he/she had to walk a distance to the outskirts of the camp. However, Moses still served as the middleman for his people. **Verse 9** reads: As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. How did God talk to Moses? **Verse 11** tells us: The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend... Moses enjoyed a close friendship with God. Imagine you waited for hours for some celebrities. Perhaps it is the President, a singing artist or a movie star. This famous person walked by and you saw him from fifty feet away. There was no chance for a handshake or an autograph. You bragged to your friend: "I met so and so up-close and personal." No, you did not! What if this superstar is a good friend of yours? He invites you to his home and you can sit down face to face with him and talk for hours. That is friendship. In the Bible, only a handful of people are called God's friends. For example, **James 2:23** says: And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. Also, Jesus said to His disciples at the

Last Supper in **John 15:15** – “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” Hours before Jesus went to the cross, He upgraded the status of His disciples from servants to friends. Except for Judas, those eleven people would become the leaders of the first Christian church. Jesus did not just send the disciples off for this important mission, He also maintained a close interaction with them. Jesus foretold the disciples that at His departure, God the Father would send the Holy Spirit to dwell in their hearts. As part of His roles, the Holy Spirit would remind the disciples of Jesus’ words. Today, the Holy Spirit also lives in the hearts of those who receive Christ as their Lord. Whenever we open the Bible, the Holy Spirit speaks to us and helps us understand the meaning behind those words. When we pray we do not just go through our shopping list of many needs. At the same time, we quiet ourselves before the Lord to listen to His voice. Surely God can speak to us in an audible voice. But more than likely, God speaks to us through the Bible. God may direct our thoughts to specific verses to answer our prayer. God sees His children as His close friends. The question is: do we treat God as our best friend? You get together with your buddies as often as possible. Do you spend time to cultivate relationship with your best friend in heaven? Or do you see God as your 911 dispatcher, emergency room or life-saver in the ocean? You only call on Him when you have a critical need. Building a close interaction with God begins with the basics. Spend time to read the Bible and pray to God every day. Come to fellowship meetings and Sunday school to study God’s Word. We get to know God through His Word. There is no short-cut.

3. Intercession 代求

Sin led to an interruption in the fellowship between God and the Israelites. In comparison, Moses still enjoyed a close interaction with God. In the rest of the chapter, Moses made use of his access to God to intercede for his fellow Israelites. He presented three requests to God. The first one is in **verse 12**: ...“You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.”... What was Moses asking for? Back in verse 2, God had told Moses that He would send an angel to go before His people. To Moses, there was a difference between go “before” and go “with.” Not only did Moses want a clear direction, he also asked God to watch over him. God answered Moses in **verse 14**: ...“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” The word “Presence” literally means “face.” In other words, God promised to go with Moses in-person for the rest of the journey. In his second prayer, Moses showed concern about his people. Let us look at **verse 16**: “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?” Moses wanted to assure that God would always be with His people. Again, God granted Moses’ request. This essentially changed God’s decision of sending an angel to go before His people. God Himself would take the lead. Moses’ third prayer might sound a little unusual. **Verse 18** reads: Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” Hadn’t Moses seen enough of God’s manifestation in the burning bush, and in the pillars of cloud and fire? Here, Moses wanted to see some visible evidence to authenticate his role as the leader of the people. What was God’s response? Let me read to you excerpts from **verses 19 to 23**: 19 And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you... 20 But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” 22 “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. 23 Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must

not be seen.” All the descriptive words of face, hand and back are anthropomorphic terms, in other words the author depicted God like a human. Of course, God does not have a front and back sides! The whole idea was that Moses was only allowed to see part of God’s glory. While we are still in this limited body, we cannot behold the full glory of God. It is like we cannot gaze at the sun directly. God gave Moses the privilege to peek at His glory. Even in the Bible, such divine evidence is rare. A handful of Biblical characters heard God’s voice or saw miraculous signs, but most other people did not. God does not want us to put our focus on supernatural phenomenon. In Jesus’ time, the Pharisees witnessed the miracles Jesus performed. But many of them still did not believe that Jesus was God. When you share the gospel with non-believers, a common response they may have is: “I will believe if God reveals Himself to me.” Will they really? God wants us to put our faith in His Word. Only God’s Word has the power to open our spiritual blindness. For Christians, God wants us to establish our faith from the Bible too. We can know God’s general will for us from the Bible. Asking God for a sign may lead us to the trap of testing Him. For example, the Bible clearly tells us to give cheerfully out of what the Lord has blessed us. We should not pray like: “God, if you want me to offer money to the church, please ask my boss to give me a 15% raise.” However, God knows that we are little in faith. He is willing to show mercy to us in a special way. For instance, you applied for jobs and you got three offers. Accepting any particular one does not contradict God’s general will. How would you choose? Someone may say: just take the one with the highest salary! You can pray for God’s guidance. God may ask you to stay in Memphis to reach out to a non-believing family member, or He may relocate you to a city with other ministry opportunities. In any case, we keep our ears open so that God can speak to us.

CONCLUSION

God is with us. The most important thing is not getting the job done but to get it done with God. He is willing to guide us if we follow Him. Though we are often disobedient, God promises to never leave us nor forsake us. He will come find us. On a stormy day, a mom took her two young kids to a toy store. They went straight to hunt for their treasures. Five-year-old Christopher looked for the Lego set he intended to get, whereas his older sister, Christine, indulged herself in the Barbie dolls display. All of a sudden, after a loud thunder, power was cut off. It was pitch black in the store. With the help of flickering lightning, Christine ran up and down the aisles to look for his brother. Finally, she saw Christopher standing still, holding on to his Lego box. Years later, on a Tuesday morning, when Christine was in the college campus she heard the terrible news about the terrorist attack in New York City. She thought of her brother, who was serving in the Air Force and was stationed in D.C. Christine quickly called her grandma. After a long wait, the line was connected. She was told that Christopher was safe. Christine felt silly that she worried about a grown-man. But in her heart, she felt an obligation to protect her younger brother no matter how old he was. Her memory went back to the toy store. Christopher was carrying the Lego in his tiny hands. When he saw Christine, he said: “I know if I wait here, you will come find me.” There are times when we may be lost in sin. Perhaps we are confused about where to go in terms of our career or ministries. We wonder where God is. But He is always there. If we just wait here, He will come find us. He will assure us of His presence, and He will point us to the way out.