

LIVING THE PRESENCE OF GOD PART 1

26 JULY 2026

SUMMARY

In this message, Bruce Downes reflects on years of ministry experience and a recent period of intense spiritual seeking to articulate a foundational conviction: that the distinguishing mark of God's people is not their programs, presentations, or resources, but the living presence of God among them. Drawing on the exchange between Moses and God in Exodus 33, Bruce Downes argues that possessing every outward blessing means nothing without the presence of God. The message calls believers to identify themselves as "missionaries of his presence" - people who have been impacted by God and who carry not merely a message or an organization, but the person of Jesus Christ into every moment of daily life. The practical challenge issued is to cultivate a continuous, moment-by-moment awareness of God's presence throughout the ordinary rhythms of life, and to invest in community, personal prayer, and Scripture reading as means of deepening that awareness.

KEY POINTS

- The fruit of ministry events and community gatherings has never come from equipment, atmosphere, or presentation, but from the genuine presence of God drawing close to his people
- God's desire, as stated in the Catechism, is for human beings to share in his own blessed life, and at every time and in every place he draws close to people
- The defining identity of believers is not organizational membership but being "missionaries of his presence" - those who make others aware of the living presence of God
- Moses refused to proceed to the promised land without the presence of God, declaring that the land, the provision, and the future were worthless without God himself
- What distinguished Israel from every other nation was that God was among them, and the same must be the deepest conviction of the community
- There is a constant danger of becoming so occupied with building the work of God that it is attempted without his presence, or of allowing activity to replace communion with Jesus
- Living as a missionary of his presence means carrying a person -Jesus - not merely an idea, a program, or a personality
- Practical disciplines include cultivating a continuous awareness of God's presence throughout the day, prioritizing weekly community gatherings, committing to daily personal prayer, reading Scripture with an openness to encountering God's presence, and allowing every interaction within the community to reflect and build that awareness

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES:

- Exodus 33:1-3: God instructs Moses to lead the people toward the promised land but declares he will not go among them because they are a stiff-necked people
- Exodus 33:12-17: Moses intercedes, insisting that without God's presence accompanying them he would rather remain in the wilderness, and God relents, promising his presence will go with them

STORIES:

- Bruce Downes recounts years of running ministry events and youth camps, observing that people arrived carrying hidden burdens, wounds, fears, cold marriages, and fading faith, and that what changed their lives was not the ministry's presentation or equipment but the presence of God encountered at those events
- Bruce Downes describes a recent seven-week period of near-total solitude and focused prayer in the United States, deliberately pressing into the presence of God and emerging with a deepened understanding of what it means to walk in continuous awareness of him
- A conversation is recalled with a woman from Minnesota who described herself as an IMPACTER, saying she was influencing people around her through who she had become
- Bruce Downes recounts a conversation with an elderly priest who taught him to pray, in which the priest affirmed that moving beyond scheduled prayer times into a constant sense of God's surrounding presence is the heart of living in his presence
- Bruce Downes shares that the ministry lacked the funds to cover the cost of the American trip, and that an unexpected donation of twenty thousand US dollars arrived from supporters in San Diego, which Bruce Downes and his team understood as a confirmation that God was directing the journey
- A youth camp leader is quoted relaying a young person's testimony: "I never knew I could have a relationship with God. I never knew I could live in the presence of God."

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SMALL GROUP GUIDE

This guide is designed to help your small group dive deeper into the message.

OPENING PRAYER

Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your discussion and open hearts to God's transforming work. Pray the IMPACTERS Community Prayer .

KEY THEMES FROM THE MESSAGE

1. **God's presence is what distinguishes us.** Moses understood that entering the promised land without God's presence would mean possessing nothing of true value. What set Israel apart from every other nation was not their strength or their land; it was that God was among them. The same is true for us today.
2. **We carry a person, not merely a program.** The effectiveness of ministry does not come from equipment, presentation, atmosphere, or personality. It comes from the living presence of Jesus. If people only encounter our organisation or our activities, they have missed the reason we were called.
3. **Living in the presence is a continuous reality, not a scheduled event.** Growing in awareness of God's presence is not limited to a 15-minute prayer time. It is a moment-by-moment consciousness that God is with us at breakfast, at work, in conversation, in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.
4. **An IMPACTER runs hard.** Trusting God does not mean passivity. Maturity in faith means pursuing God with dedication and discipline while remaining dependent on him for the fruit.
5. **The prayer of Moses must become our prayer.** "Lord, if your presence does not go with us, we do not want to go." This is the posture of a community that values God above outcomes, success, or growth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Section 1: The Presence That Changes People

The message opens by reflecting on years of ministry events and the realisation that what changed people was not the presentation, the equipment, or Bruce Downes. It was the presence of God.

1. Think of a moment in your own life when you were genuinely aware of God's presence. What was that like? What led to it?
2. The message suggests that people often arrive at church or community events carrying hidden burdens, unspoken questions, cold marriages, fading hope, and unnamed fears. How does this shape the way you think about the people around you each week?
3. Do you tend to place more confidence in what you bring to a situation; your words, your preparation, your personality, or in the presence of God? What does your honest answer reveal?

Section 2: Moses and the Non-Negotiable Presence

Read Exodus 33:1-3 and 33:12-17. Summarise the passage for the group in your own words before discussing.

4. God offered Moses and the people an angel to lead them, the promised land, and every provision they had been waiting for, but said he himself would not go with them (Exodus 33:3). Why do you think God made this distinction? What does it reveal about his character?
5. Moses responded by saying that he would rather remain in the wilderness with God than enter the promised land without him (Exodus 33:15). How honestly does that reflect your own priorities? What things in your life (good things) might you be tempted to pursue in place of God's presence?
6. Moses told God that what would make Israel distinct from every other nation was that God was among them (Exodus 33:16). What does it mean practically for your community or small group to be marked by God's presence? What would that look like on an ordinary Tuesday?

Section 3: We Carry a Person

The message draws a clear distinction between carrying a message or running a program and carrying the person of Jesus.

7. The message states: "We carry a person. We don't proclaim merely an idea. We proclaim Jesus." What is the difference between those two things in everyday life? Can you think of an example from your own experience?
8. The message warns: "We must never become so occupied with building the work of God that we attempt to build it without his presence." Where do you see this temptation most clearly in your personal life, your family, or your community?
9. Someone shared with Bruce Downes that after hearing about being a missionary of presence, they found themselves at lunch with a friend who was sharing something painful and they thought, "How do I bring his presence into this moment right now?" Has there been a moment like that for you recently? What did you do?

Section 4: Living in the Presence

The message closes with a call to practice a continuous awareness of God's presence throughout every part of daily life.

10. The priest Bruce Downes referenced described the goal as "walking in the presence; the constant awareness of God surrounding you." What is one specific part of your day where you rarely think about God's presence? What would it take to change that?
11. The message encourages making the weekly community gathering a high priority, not out of obligation, but because God dwells among his people. How do you currently think about your weekly gathering? Does it feel like an encounter with God's presence, or more like an appointment to keep?

12. Bruce Downes says: "To those of you who maybe don't give it a thought or haven't given it a thought, now's the time." Is there an area of your life where you sense God is saying that to you right now?

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Choose one or more of the following to commit to before the group meets again.

Practice the awareness. Set a recurring reminder on your phone several times throughout the day with a simple prompt such as "He is here." When it goes off, pause for thirty seconds and acknowledge God's presence wherever you are and whatever you are doing.

Pray the prayer of Moses. Each morning this week, begin your day with this prayer: "Lord, if your presence does not go with me today, I do not want to go." Write down what shifts in your attitude or decisions as a result.

Bring the presence into one conversation. Before a conversation you know is coming this week, a difficult one, a routine one, or one with someone who is hurting, pause beforehand and ask God to make his presence known through you in that moment.

Commit to community. If you have been inconsistent in attending your weekly gathering, make a deliberate decision to prioritise it this week. Come with the expectation that God is present and wants to meet you there.

Read and reflect. Read Exodus 33:12-17 slowly, once each day this week. Each time, ask yourself: "Am I more like Moses, unwilling to move without God's presence or am I settling for the promised land without him?"

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, if your presence does not go with us, we do not want to go. We are not seeking success. We are seeking you. Let your presence be the foundation of everything we are and everything we do. Make us missionaries of your presence to the people around us. Amen.