

Don't Be Mistaken

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”) (Matthew 1:23).

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-23

Song: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

One December, I was a part of a group of volunteers who signed thank-you letters for people who had donated money to a ministry project. Because it was so close to Christmas, on every letter we wrote, “Immanuel—Matthew 1:23.” Weeks later, one of the letter recipients was distressed. Having misread the handwriting, the donor thought we had written, “Matthew 7:23.” *That* verse reads, “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” Imagine the person’s relief when we explained that they had been mistaken!

Over 2,000 years ago, something amazing happened: Jesus was born! He was God in human flesh. But as we read the account of Jesus’ time here on earth, we see that many were mistaken about who He really was. They didn’t realize that God was walking among them. They were mistaken about the message that the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed many years before (Isaiah 7:14).

In a culture that tries to deny God’s existence, it’s important for us to not be mistaken about God’s presence in our lives as believers. His Word is clear. He is with us!

Father, thank You for clearly showing me through Your Word that You are with us . . . with me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

November 18–24. **Jake Follis** is a minister living in Oklahoma with his wife and daughter. He is an award-winning storyteller who enjoys reading and writing.

Rest in His Presence

The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14).

Scripture: Exodus 33:12-23

Song: “Near to the Heart of God”

I was at the pediatrician with my 9-year-old daughter. I knew what was coming. It was time for her to get a flu shot, and my presence was going to comfort her through it. What I didn't know was that the doctor was going to ask me if I wanted one too. Because I don't like shots, I suddenly became anxious. I wasn't prepared for this! I tried to think of a good reason why I shouldn't get one right then, but I couldn't come up with anything. I thought my presence in the room was going to comfort my daughter, but now *I* needed some support.

In today's passage, Moses was having a conversation with God. He was asking some big questions. I wonder if Moses was anxious about the future. It is clear that Moses wanted to make sure that God was going to be with him and the people he'd been called to lead. Moses knew that God's presence was crucial.

We can hope to find rest in the presence of others, but only God can truly deliver the comfort, peace, and rest we're looking for when we're anxious. He promises that in His presence, we will always find the rest we need. And that is something that no one else can offer.

Father, when I am anxious, remind me that You promise to provide rest in Your presence. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Presence of Our Holy God

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with [Moses] and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God” (Exodus 34:5-6).

Scripture: Exodus 34:1-9

Song: “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”

In the musical *Bye-Bye Birdie*, the character Conrad Birdie is a 1950s rock and roll superstar. His fans cheer, scream, and swoon in his presence. In fact, in one scene, Conrad Birdie performs a song that results in nearly everybody in attendance fainting by the end of the number! While this musical is purely fictional, it obviously parallels the real-life reactions that many people experienced in the presence of other famous musicians during that time period.

In today’s passage, Moses is in the presence of God, and God speaks. As amazing as that is, Moses’ response to God’s presence is equally important. Exodus 34:8-9 tells us that Moses fell to the ground, *immediately* bowing. He worshiped from that posture. He asked God for forgiveness.

When we’re in the presence of other people whom we regard as great for one reason or another, our emotions can get the best of us. We may get nervous and speechless, or we might even faint! But it’s only in the presence of God that we must immediately bow down and worship. In His presence we come face-to-face with His holiness and with our need for His mercy.

Father, it is fitting and right for me to respond to You right now with reverence and worship. Thank You for Your mercy. Please forgive my sin. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Eternal Joy in His Presence

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11).

Scripture: Psalm 16

Song: “I’ll Fly Away”

The 100-year-old nursing-home resident was in the final days of her life. I had visited her regularly for the past five years, and I had found her to be one of the most joyful, Jesus-loving people I’d ever met. A World War II veteran, she had lived an extraordinary life, and she never missed an opportunity to talk about Jesus. Just a few days before she passed away, her grandson came to visit her. Because of her failing health, she was nearly blind. So, when the grandson, a bearded man, asked her if she knew who he was, she replied, “Are you Jesus?”

The words David wrote in Psalm 16 make it clear that he was a man who knew how amazing it is to be in the presence of God. He knew the security, power, and joy found there. David wanted to be in no other place.

When I read Psalm 16, I can hear it as though the voice of my 100-year-old friend were saying the words. She was ready to be in the presence of Jesus because she knew the joy that she would experience in eternity with Him. When we grasp the truth that there is no better place to be than in the presence of Jesus, we will experience joy here and into eternity.

Father, You are always present. Fill me with joy now and forever. In Jesus’ name, amen.

This Is Jesus

Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:20).

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

Song: “Sweet, Sweet Spirit”

I once watched a movie about a fictional band who was struggling to remain relevant after years of fame, fortune, and success. As time went on, few if any fans were showing up to their autograph signings, the attendance at their shows was dwindling, and they had essentially become a laughingstock in their current culture. They lived in a state of frustration and conflict because they were obsessed with having big crowds, popularity, and superstardom. When such fame could not be achieved, they became angry and threatened to quit. If there weren't throngs of admirers showing up, it was all meaningless to them. They didn't want to bother being present for just a few devotees.

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus promises to be with His followers, and His promise to be present isn't dependent on there being large numbers of people gathering together to seek Him. In fact, He lets His followers know that He will be with them even when the gatherings are small.

This is an important reminder. Ultimately, the size of a gathering isn't what determines whether or not the Lord is present. Jesus is *always* present as His followers gather together in His name. It can be a large church service on a Sunday morning, or it can be a gathering of two people in a hospital room on a Tuesday night. Either way, Jesus is there.

Father, thank You for always being present whenever I gather with other believers to seek You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Always

[Jesus said,] “Go and make disciples of all nations. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”
(Matthew 28:19-20).

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

Song: “Go Ye into All the World”

I always get donuts from a local donut shop on Saturday mornings. Well, not *always*. Some Saturdays I don't have time, so I don't eat breakfast at all. I always go to church on Sunday. Well, not *always*. If I'm on vacation, it just might not work with my schedule. Because they're my favorite team, I always watch the Cincinnati Bengals games. Well, not *always*. Sometimes their games aren't televised where I live in Oklahoma.

At the end of Matthew 28, Jesus delivers a message, known today as the Great Commission. It is recognizable to most Christians as Jesus' marching orders for His followers. At the conclusion of these important instructions, Jesus assures His disciples, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

When *we* use the word *always*, we often don't really mean it in a literal sense. Rather, we usually mean “often” or “most of the time” or “a lot.” But, when *Jesus* used the word *always*, He meant it. There are no exceptions attached to it, no qualifiers as to when He might not really follow through. So, when we read Jesus' words in today's passage, we can be confident that His presence is with us every second of every day, for all time.

Father, I believe You mean *always* when You promise to be with me, and I'm thankful You're with me today as I carry the gospel message. In Jesus' name, amen.

You Are There

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7).

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12

Song: “In His Presence”

Due to its location on an island in the San Francisco Bay, its fortified walls and barbed-wire fences, and its many guards, Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary was thought to be inescapable. But in June 1962, three inmates did escape from Alcatraz. The details of the story are captivating. Movies have been made, books have been written, and for decades people have discussed and debated about how these prisoners were able to pull off such a feat and whether or not they survived. They left and were never found!

In Psalm 139, David beautifully and majestically describes God’s knowledge, power, and presence. Essentially, David ponders whether it’s possible to go to a place where God is not—whether it’s possible to escape Him, possible to flee from His presence. David clearly concludes that no distance, location, or realm is ever out of the reach of God’s Spirit. Wherever David found himself, God would be there.

People can be pretty good at fleeing. They can run and hide from many things that they want to leave behind for one reason or another. They can even escape maximum-security prisons. But it is impossible to flee from the presence of God. And that is a good thing, because we’re meant to dwell securely in His presence.

Father, thank You for always being present. No matter where I go, remind me that You are there with me and that there is nothing to fear. In Jesus’ name, amen.