

Decided Before the Moment

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Series: Presence With: God

Last week we've been going through our series on our new vision and our new purpose statements, and we are finishing up at least the sermon part of our series on our presence with God this weekend. Last week we talked about the fact that life is actually full of pain and we can't avoid it. Sometimes when life is really, really hard, at least in our Western mindset, we start to question, God, why is this happening to me, and why are those things not going away in my life? We don't typically prepare ourselves for the amount of pain that life is going to bring at us, and our culture teaches us not to deal with that pain very well, by the way. We don't typically prepare ourselves for that, but God doesn't ignore that pain, and He is there in the middle of that pain, walking with us no matter what we're going through, no matter what season of life you're in. He is there with you on that road. And He even weeps and He cries and He is in pain with us. And I think He also wants us to avoid pain if we can, especially the type of pain that is self-inflicted. He wants to keep us from our own painful decisions, and I think the main way He does that is actually by His own presence living with us in our lives—instructing us, guiding them with His Spirit.

This is where we're at. We are people of presence. Our purpose is to be present with God, present with each other, and present in our community. And the reason this has spoken to so many of us is that we live in a world that is not very present. It's a struggle to actually be in this state of mind and in any of those locations. Many people struggle with it. In fact, everybody I know and every pastor, spiritual leader—the most spiritual person I know—actually still struggles with this on some level. Evidently, there's this battle going on between good and evil. It's a thing. And I think sometimes we feel guilty and we beat ourselves up because I don't want that more. Realize that there's a reason for that, and remind the enemy where he belongs. That's sort of what today's about.

Now, a lot of my life, I've made some really poor decisions. I know I'm not alone in here. We can breathe on that one. But most of my poor decisions and most of my self-inflicted pain actually isn't intentional. It came from a lack of preparedness. Most of the fear I've dealt with in all the painful things of my life, I can actually point back to—look at it, at least the things that were caused by me—and I go, I just wasn't even thinking about this ahead of time. I wasn't prepared for this moment. And when it sprang up on me, I made really bad decisions sometimes.

My wife will tell you that I've learned to not just say it's a 20-minute hike. Six hours later, everybody's starving, and we've got a sprained ankle because there's rocks in there. "Did you even look at this on the map?" I'm like, it looked fun to me. We've learned—there's an app called AllTrails, and maybe I should look at that a little bit before we go on our next hike. We need to have a new hike here. The last hike we went on here was one of the hikes, and we spent the night at a frozen lake in the snow, and we're still here.

But my idea of preparedness through most of college was, you know, the time in between classes to study for the midterm exam? That was the time for that. It's not something I'm super proud of, but we are here today.

I think that being with God and having the Spirit with you is not something that is a momentary decision, by the way. And most of us treat it that way. Being with God, having a Spirit living within us, is decided long before the moment actually arrives. God's presence is a decision that we make ahead of time. It's a pre-decision. We're going to look at four rules, learn from a life that was actually lived not so well in the Bible—where God's presence was with a country and a person and a promised person to rescue that country, but he turned them over to their own desires.

A little background, if you were sitting in here for the background of the book of Judges, I'm going to repeat just a little bit of that. But it's not the most pleasant. It's not like the book that you go to for your devotionals. You know what I mean? It's just like, well, this is really bloody. But God's chosen people go through this cycle over and over again in the book of Judges. They fall away from God by sinning. They're oppressed by their

enemies. They cry out to God for a rescue. He comes and rescues them. And guess what? They do it all over again and again and again. None of us know what that's like in our own life, right?

But Israel in the Old Testament had this kind of arch enemy, this people group. You guys know who it is, right? Who are they?

The Philistines.

Yeah, they're a particular people. If you heard the story of David and Goliath, Goliath was a Philistine. They had these wars against each other. In Judges chapter 13, it starts with Israel. They're in this place. They're in this cycle. And they're oppressed by the enemy, the Philistines. They're in a 40-year oppression by their enemy that borders them, by the way. They aren't really at war at this time. But Israel is more of a subjugate of the Philistines at this time in history. And these territories bordered each other. And what once was their enemy, their mortal enemy, was now people that they're starting to kind of bleed together with. They were instructed to actually stay away from these people because of this, and they were not supposed to marry them or intermingle with them, because these lines of what was acceptable and how to worship God as the only God started to gray.

We have four rules. Before that, at the very end of the book of Judges, it says everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And a man named Samson was no exception to this. We have four rules from the life of Samson this morning. You ready?

The first rule: make the plan, or pre-decide the presence.

Okay, now in the story there's this angel that appears to a lady and her husband. They can't have a child. And Samson has to have a Nazirite vow. And if you look back in the Old Testament laws, we'll see that actually from birth, there's no wine, no cutting of hair. They're completely dedicated to God and His direction. And the plan for his life was actually decided before he was born. He was supposed to save Israel from the Philistines.

Let me say this: I think that presence with God starts with a dedication. It starts with saying, I'm actually making this plan with our children, with ourselves, and we're looking forward into the future. And there is this time and space that nothing else will touch because we are dedicating it to Jesus. This is where presence with God actually begins.

And most of us, we do what? We sit here, we pray, we're like, where are You, God? And I need You right now in my life. It's true. We have those moments. I have those moments all the time. But if you want a consistent, helpful relationship with God that feels steady, you'll plan ahead.

I had a conversation with someone about that this week. I said last week—spoke to them in a way—that they only feel close to God when they're going through something painful in their life. And then they ask this crazy statement and this crazy question. Are you ready for it? "I want to feel close to God even when times are good."

And when you think about that, it's a pretty basic statement. Like, who doesn't want that? But the reality is, that's a lot of our lives—that we go, oh, thanks, God. And we do the same cycle that Israel goes in. And all of a sudden, things are good. And I'm like, I can just relax. And I'm going to go party. I'm going to do whatever I want. And then we go, oh, gosh, I'm in trouble. And what would it actually look like if we were close to Jesus even in the good times? And we stuck with Him. And He stuck with us. And we're together. We're moving through life even when everything is going right. My life would look different.

Setting this as a priority and sticking to it is step number one, and we're going to come back into that step number one kind of over and over through the following steps. But as an important relationship—I've shared this before, but I think with my wife and I, we realize we have incredibly demanding jobs. And if we don't carve out time for each other, guess what? It's going to be taken up by something else. And we made sure we had a four-hour block—and I'm talking past tense. We'll get there again, honey, I promise. We had a four-hour block carved out, and I believe that that's why I'm happy with her today because of that. I'm happy with you.

She rolls her eyes. Please don't put me on the spot like that. She's happy with me later. Yeah.

But presence with God, presence with our Savior, is not something that just happens by accident. It is something that is intentional, and we actually have to take that and say, God, this is Your time. So the plan existed for Samson to be dedicated to God. He just didn't stay with it.

Rule number two. Rule number one: pre-decide. Make the plan. Make the decision. Stop over-trusting our own willpower.

Okay, so Israel—I just talked about this—Israel and the Canaanites. The Philistines were part of the Canaanites. They're bordering each other. And there was this little town only a few miles from Samson's hometown. And those of you that read the story, you know the name of this town. Maybe, maybe not. Okay, never mind. Don't say it. Don't ruin it for the rest of us.

But Israel had started to incorporate many pagan ways of doing life because of the proximity. It was close. They just started doing the things because, well, it was sin and pleasure is pretty fun in the short term. But what was custom and forbidden was just kind of normal. It was forgotten. This is what we call pluralism, where we just put it all into one basket. And this terrible thing actually happens to Israel in this time, and God is just part of the customs of their life, and He's not the center of it anymore. Are we together?

Samson is born at the very end of chapter 13, and there is this Philistine town just a couple of miles from him. We hear about his birth, and then the very next thing is: Samson went down to Timnah. Timnah is the Philistine town a couple miles away. We hear nothing else about this man's life. This is the first action he does—is walk down to this Philistine town. And he saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. He's window shopping.

[Laughter]

Exactly. Here's the thing: he knows better. You would know from the Levitical law and from the stuff previously that you're forbidden to actually intermarry—especially somebody who is dedicated to saving Israel from the Philistines—and he's down there, and the first thing he does is go down to Timnah. He knows what he's looking for.

When we were at seminary, my wife and I saved up actually quite a bit of money because we wanted to get our first dog, and we'd been married five years, at that point, something like that. And we were moving into an apartment where we could actually have pets. That was like our goal—is to find an apartment where we could have a dog because if you've ever been to Michigan, there's nothing else good there. So we were like, let's make it good for us, right? And so we saved up a bit of money. We knew what type of dog we wanted and we were going to go get a dog. And so we drive almost three hours to Detroit because we were going to go look at puppies.

First off, that's like the dumbest statement ever, by the way. You don't go look at puppies. You go get puppies, okay? We go look at a puppy. We had this breed in mind. We knew which one, and we had a good discussion about that on the way there. And I remember the moment we get to this place. We know that they have a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel at this place. And we're like, we got to go look at this place. And they have a couple of them. And the first thing that happens when we walk in the door, they go, "Have you ever heard of a Cavachon?" And I just go, this is not good. This is bad. This is very bad.

And I remember them bringing out this tiny little creature. Go ahead and show the picture. He's the one over here. Yeah, I know. I know. This was a couple weeks after we brought them home, but little Pippin could fit in the palm of your hand. I looked over at my wife and I just go, this is not—I said, well, I know one thing. It's either that dog is going home with us or I'm going to have to figure out another way home from Detroit. You can see it on her face. And we're sitting there, and we look at these other Cavaliers, and they're all just going crazy, and they're crazy. I don't want any of them. And I know we're going to go home with this other thing. That thing.

And then they said, oh, we have one more cavalier. It's like, you know what they're doing. They save that one—and little Luck comes and sits between my legs and looks up at me like, are you going to take me home? And I just got out my credit card and just go, take it.

But see, here's the thing: you can window shop all you want with something that you want and you're going to bite. We start doing this thing in life where we come close to this line and you're just like, well, I'm just going to look. Let's take a peek. We're going to just go look at puppies. And we trust that somehow, even though history has failed us just basically in every single way, we trust our own willpower to be like, no, I'll make a good decision in this moment. We're kind of dumb. And we're emotional creatures who make bad decisions because we want something. Sorry, that was very negative of me to say that. I'm sorry. But it's true.

I think that often what we do is we overthink this and we go, no, no, I'll make a good—no you don't. You don't make a good decision. And we realize that sometimes—sometimes it's puppies and we can laugh it off and it's good, and then other times it is things that will steal your life. It will steal the very presence of God from your soul. And then you sound like that. That our presence, as well as God's, is often taken away because we go too close to a line that we know we shouldn't even be near in the first place.

You've made a decision—now follow it. In fact, there's a story in Proverbs about this. Proverbs chapter 5, verse 8. It's this father talking to his son about don't go near her house. Sorry, ladies, it's Father's Day. In verse 8 it says:

Keep your way far from her; do not go near the door of her house.

Because you know what will happen if you do. Eventually you're going to cave. That's a pre-decision in Proverbs. It's a father speaking to his son.

We do this all the time, right? I've had people ask me, "Pastor, where's the line?" What kind of a question is that? It's a bad question from the beginning, actually, right? But we do it. I do it in my own life. We ask like, where's—how many—like how much can I get away with and still be okay, right? How much of this can I do on my own and follow my own desires and make a mess of my life and still be okay? But why are we asking that in the first place? It's like, how much can I walk away from God and still be present with Him?

Now, I believe fully in grace, and we will get there at the end of the story, but I also believe that we can abuse that grace. I heard an illustration of this. Now, hang on with me. And it's like a young couple have committed to not having sex before marriage, and they're in a car—they're in the backseat of a car, they're in a really romantic place. You getting nervous yet? And things are getting hot and heavy. And then one of them goes, well, how far do we go?

Get out of the car!

[Laughter]

Like everybody—everything's going to be okay outside of the car. In fact, don't even get in the car in the first place. Don't go down there because you're too close to that line. You can smell her hair about four or five times and you're going to cave. You know it. What are we even doing here? You're putting yourself in a place where your willpower is going to fail. It's a guarantee.

We can take the puppies down now. They realized they were still up there. My beautiful wife is up here.

You have to pre-decide. You, in your life, have to pre-decide to not go down to Timnah. You know better, and then we kind of still just do it. Why go to a place where our temptation is going to be overwhelming to us? It's going to lead us down a path.

It's like the Holy Spirit, you know. Have you seen the meme with Ben Stiller? And he's like, please. I mean, come on. I know you. You know you. And I know you know that I know you.

[Laughter]

Wow, I thought that was going to land much better. Okay.

Don't be, in other words, like—you know yourself enough to know yourself enough to not go down to Timnah, right? But we kind of make excuses, and that's our next point.

Rule number three: do not negotiate with terrorists. There's a bunch of terrorists in this room, and I'm not talking about your children, by the way, okay? I know your children. Be careful.

James 1:14 says this:

You are dragged away by your own evil desire.

This is why we fall away from God's presence, by the way, most of the time—every time. It's that you are the emotional terrorist that I'm talking about. Don't negotiate with terrorists.

In fact, Kobe would say this. Kobe would say this. He was asked in an interview—he goes, why are you the one that shows up at 4 a.m. when everybody else is still in bed? He's the one practicing. He's icing his knees by the time everybody else is coming in there practicing. Like, how are you doing? How are you disciplined enough to actually be in this place day after day? Don't you get tired? He goes, yeah, I get tired. He says, but I already decided something. And I don't negotiate with myself. I know what I want. I'm going to search after it with my entire being. I'm chasing after this. There's a reason why Kobe is up for a debate of the best basketball player of all time. Don't go there. All right. I know it's a heated thing. But it's because he knew who he was, he knew what he wanted in life, and he chased after it, and he knew where his priority was, and that he didn't negotiate with himself when his mind thought otherwise.

And you and I live in a world—we live in a culture that goes, well, do I really want to? And we do it with our spiritual life. And I do it with my spiritual life.

There's a lady that Samson falls in love with and he knows better. But here's the thing: the negotiations—there's this lady who tricks him and she's beautiful. She's working for the enemy, and the negotiation is not with Delilah. They were before that. They were with himself. Delilah wasn't the first Philistine woman he fell in love with, by the way. There's a whole story before that that ends really, really bad. But he falls in love with this woman named Delilah, and she's trying to kill him and he knows it, but he keeps coming back over and over and over again. He's following after his passion, which he knows is wrong and he knows it's going to kill him. And it's like you think he would get his Netflix account back by now. But like the third or fourth time, she's like, well, tell me how you're strong. And then all of a sudden, all these people are doing exactly what she just told him to do, to kill him. And by the third day, you expect to be like, okay, it's time to move out. And he does it. He stays.

We go to these places. Do you think it would be more boring at home? It's not as much fun now watching Netflix by yourself, is it? Of course it would be more boring at home. Of course it's not going to be exciting. Of course it's not what he sees in the moment and what he wants in that moment, but you know that that's going to be better for him. We are a victim of our own desires so many times.

Carrie Fisher—she played Princess Leia in the original *Star Wars*. She knows about this. She talks about going to her first AA meeting, trying to get free. And she goes, well, I went, but I didn't like it. So I'm not going back. And her friend comes up to her. She goes, I don't care if you don't like it. And it was like a light bulb went off in Carrie's head, she said. And she goes, I've never thought of it like that. It doesn't matter if I don't like it. I know that this is what's best for me. I know that this is what's going to save my life. And I know that this is actually what I want deep down in life. Even if I have to sit through awkward conversations of, hi, my name's Carrie. I don't care. I have to be free of this. And she went and she became free of that demon in her life. Because she went to something that she didn't even want to really go to, but she knew she needed it. And she decided ahead of time. She didn't negotiate with terrorists—with her own self.

That's number three. And number four—first we have make the plan, make the decision, stop trusting our own willpower, and don't negotiate with terrorists. And I want to say number four before we end tonight is that no

matter where we're at, it isn't too late. Okay? And I know we say that all the time, but let's look at the end of the story of Samson for a moment.

It's—by the way, I know Samson shows up in like the heroes of faith in Hebrews, and that will be one of the questions I ask Jesus when we get there—because this is not a great story. This is how you don't live your life. This is like what not to do with basically every decision that he made. And it led him to a place where the Philistines finally captured him. He finally told Delilah what was going to take God's presence from him, really. They gouge out his eyes and he is now their slave and he's their entertainment on a nightly basis.

The story doesn't end there. There is redemption, and he actually fulfills his purpose, as God had called him to do. In his death, he pulls down the roof upon the Philistines, and they perish together. Now, God still used him, but—let me just say something. In that darkness for a moment, you are not Samson, okay? We need to realize this is a super dark story and it's a super abstract story and you're sitting in church and he probably would have never done that.

Here's the thing: let's say we don't do so hot at all this stuff and we sort of follow Samson's example and we aren't disciplined and we've—I will be honest with you—a large portion of my adolescence and even my young adulthood I fell into that. They lived in that. And no, I'm not alone in here.

The good news today is this: we are not Samson. And while we do things that aren't helpful in our lives, none of us have burned whole fields down that we're feeding people with foxes' tails on fire. Such a weird story, by the way. Or killed as many Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. But here's the thing: we all have a Timnah. We all have a Delilah. And there are Philistines in our lives that wish to take the presence of God from your life.

There was a time in my life—well, I was engaged before I was married to Crystal. I was engaged to another girl when I was 19 years old. I knew I shouldn't have been with her. We lived together. We partied. That was like our life. And I remember the night we needed to break up, and it was the most oppressive feeling I've ever felt, actually still to this day, of feeling like I have to get away from this, but I can't. And I remember us breaking up that night, and I remember having this ring and going home to my father who had just kicked me out of his house not too long ago. And I went to my dad. It was a military guy. And he looked down at me, knowing I wasn't okay, and he gave me a huge hug, and we laid on the couch, and I wept on my father's chest for hours.

This is the type of model that we have for grace. And I'm thankful for all the fathers and the parent figures in this place that have shown us that model of a God who loves us so much—that there are things that we're like, I can't just deal with that, I've got to let you learn this lesson out here on your own, but I will always be here for you. I don't care where you've gone. I don't care how far you've gone. And I don't care if the Philistines have captured you, are using you as entertainment, gouged out your eyes—it doesn't matter. I'm with you.

Here's what I know: the presence with God, it is a spiritual discipline. It is something you pre-decide, but it's also our defense. And He is also our safe place when we know that we are out of every other place that we've tried to run away from. That His presence itself is life. And He's not waiting for us to have it figured out. He's waiting for us to just come and sit and to be with Him and to even cry with Him if we have to.

You guys, this is what we've been building towards. This is what we're going to continue building on, but this is where I'd like to leave us. Our last sermon on the presence of God is leaving us with this: it really is a choice. He has made Himself available to you, and it is up to us to make that move to say, I choose You now in the future. That Your presence exists in my life because I've made it the priority of my life and I've put things around it so that nothing can touch this special time between us. That is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. That is what it means to be a Christian. And I believe that that is what it means to actually have life itself. It's to know and to hear God's voice and to experience the presence of God in our own hearts, in our own lives. And He's leaving that opportunity for you and me today.

Let's have a word of prayer.

Jesus, thank You. Thank You for coming into this world to save us, to give us an opportunity to even hear Your Spirit. And Lord, no matter where we're at, whether we're the most disciplined person in this room where we've stuck with You, or we're like Samson—God, I pray that no matter what is happening in our lives, that You break

the chains of the enemy and that we can return to You and our presence can be one together. Because we know that's why we're sitting in this room, God, is because we know Your presence is life itself. Give us that, Lord. Give us the discipline. Give us the look. If we do nothing else today, let us plan our week out with You at the center of it. If we have to wake up an hour earlier and break off something in our schedule that we want to do, no matter what it is, God, help us to take advantage of the life that You have given our schedule now, Lord. Thank You for our people here. Thank You that I believe that Your presence is here right now in this place with us because we've made it a priority to pray as a church, and that's what we're going to do next week, and we look forward to meeting You here, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.