

A Meeting With God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I was at the gardens of the Palace of Holyrood House last week. I was there for the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award celebration because our son Joshua was invited.

He got a letter from His Royal Highness, the Prince Edward, Duke of Edinburgh, saying that he looked forward to seeing him in person, seeing Joshua in person, and congratulating him at the Palace of Holyrood House.

And so his parents were also invited to join him for the award as guests. But in order to go to the Palace of Holyrood House, there were certain rules and regulations that had to be followed.

We couldn't just walk up into the Palace of Holyrood House and then walk up to Prince Edward and say hi and start conversation with him. I guess you could try that, but it wouldn't really work.

So what we had to do, we were told, was to go on a certain day. We had to enter via a certain gate. We had to arrive at a certain time. We had to show a certain colored card to be admitted.

[1 : 0 3] And then we had to present two different forms of identification. And so the instructions were clear. Otherwise, there would be no access given and no way of meeting Prince Edward.

And so as we come to Exodus chapter 19, we see that a meeting with God is a serious matter. And it can only be done on God's terms.

He chooses the rules of engagement, as it were. It isn't us. And so we see what the Israelites must do, not just to approach a holy God, but what they must do even to survive an encounter with a holy God.

And so in the Exodus story so far, God has saved his people from their slavery in Egypt. And now he wants to enter into a special relationship with them, a covenant to dwell with them.

But for the Israelites to enjoy this blessing, they have to obey God fully and keep his covenant. And so we get God giving the terms of this covenant at the Mount Sinai mountain.

[2 : 1 3] This is where the covenant relationship, in a sense, doesn't start. It was there in Genesis. But this is God setting out the terms of what this covenant will look like for his people.

Because for Israel to meet with God, there were certain rules and certain regulations that had to be followed. They couldn't just walk up to God whenever they wanted, as we see from our reading.

And so what is all this telling us? Well, essentially, it is telling us that it is impossible for sinful human beings, people like you and me, it's impossible for us to meet with the holy God.

We cannot even approach him. He is the one who has to set the terms to make it possible for us to be in a relationship with him. And that's the point. God is gracious and he wants a relationship with us.

But he is also holy and so we can't get near him because of our sin. And so whether you're here this afternoon and you call yourself a Christian or not, this text shows us what's involved in meeting with God.

[3 : 20] And so we're going to look at three points as we look at chapter 19 this afternoon. First of all, a meeting with God, what it requires. Secondly, why it is serious. And thirdly, how it is possible.

A meeting with God, what it requires, why it is serious and how it is possible. So first of all, what a meeting with God requires. It requires grace-driven obedience. So let's just get the context here in verses 1 and 2.

So they set up camp at Mount Sinai, which is where they actually stay for the rest of the book of Exodus.

And they were there at Sinai for almost a year. And during this time, Moses would go up and down the mountain into the presence of God.

In fact, Mount Sinai is where God's promise to Moses in Exodus chapter 3 is fulfilled. So when God commissioned Moses at the burning bush, he said, Exodus chapter 3 verse 12, I will be with you and this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you.

[4 : 38] When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain. And so when God said this mountain, in Exodus 3, he was referring to Mount Sinai, which we get to in Exodus chapter 19.

And so the place where God revealed himself to one man, Moses, at a burning bush, is now the place where God reveals himself to a whole nation, Israel, at a burning mountain.

And God had a message for them. It's there in verse 3 to 6. Then Moses went up to God and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. So this is the first of three journeys that Moses makes up the mountain in Exodus chapter 19.

[5 : 58] And here what God does is he announces the terms of his covenant with his people. But it's important to notice the order that God says things in. Because God speaks of his deliverance before he gives his demands.

So first God reminded Israel what he had already done for them. There in verse 4. He says, You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

So that's God saying how he saved them. The picture is of an eagle carrying its young on its wings. Now apparently eaglets are especially helpless.

And it takes around 12 weeks before they are physically able to fly. And so the point is that Israel were also completely helpless in Egypt.

They could do nothing. They needed to be carried out. They couldn't fight their way out in their own strength. They didn't have any. And they couldn't even walk their way out, out of their own free will.

[7 : 04] No, God had to carry them out. And so God is saying that he saved them by his grace. It was all his doing. It wasn't theirs. And so what God says here is really the background to everything else in Exodus.

Because the Exodus from Egypt was never an end in itself. It was so that God could enter into this special relationship with his people. And so it's only after God delivers his people that he then makes demands of his people.

And that's how the relationship would work. So verse 5 says, Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

So the covenant was conditional. But it wasn't by keeping the covenant that they be saved because they already were saved. Their obedience was an indication that they were God's saved people.

So God didn't say, If you obey me, then I'll save you out of Egypt. God didn't say, If you keep my laws and my commandments, then maybe if you've done a good enough job, I might save you.

[8 : 23] No, God says, I've already saved you. Now here is how I want you to go and live. And so they had to obey God because he had already saved them.

That was their proper response to God's grace. And so it was to be grace-driven obedience. That was to characterize their lives.

And I think we've really got to get this if we are ever going to understand how to relate to God. Because if we don't, we'll never enjoy a relationship with God or even grasp what Christianity is all about.

Because so many people will misunderstand God and get Christianity wrong by failing to grasp God's grace. And people often think and get it the wrong way around that if I obey, then God will love and accept me.

Rather than, I am loved and accepted, therefore I want to obey. But Exodus tells us that it's grace that comes before the law.

[9 : 34] Grace is what sets the pattern for our life with God. And what happens here in Exodus, in essence, sets the pattern for what the rest of the Bible teaches us about salvation.

That is, salvation is by grace. It is not by works. We're saved by grace through faith in Jesus. And our response to God's grace is that we then want to obey his commands.

And we obey them, not to be saved, because we already are, but we obey them because of our relationship with him. Our obedience is grace-driven. It is grace-fueled.

It flows out of love and gratitude for all that God has, first of all, and already done for us. Because it's only through obedience to God that we will ever grow in a relationship with him.

If we don't obey, we won't enjoy the covenant blessings that God promises his people. We can't experience intimacy with God if we disobey what God says.

[10 : 46] So just think, by way of illustration of any kind of committed relationship, if a relationship is going to work, then it will always involve discovering things that the other person enjoys in that relationship.

The things that bring them joy and delight, the things that matter to them, and then wanting to do those things. When I first met Shona, I realized that she really loved playing squash, which I thought was a ridiculous game, let alone call it a sport.

I wasn't a fan of squash at all, but then I started playing because I realized it's what she enjoyed. I didn't enjoy it to start with because I kept getting thrashed by her.

But then over time, I began to quite like playing squash. And so the point is, if any relationship is going to work, then it's never a chore doing what the other person enjoys or likes or what matters to them.

Relationships grow, develop, flourish as we do what matters to the other person. And so it's the same with God. And that's what's being communicated to the Israelites here.

[11 : 55] Obeying God is the way that their relationship with God will grow and develop and flourish. And so when we know God's love for us, we'll want to obey him because that's how we grow in our relationship with him.

And that's how we enjoy all of his blessings as one of his people. And that's why God says to Israel that they will be his treasured possession. They will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Now, a treasured possession indicates royal property. So God is saying here, Israel, you are my property. You are my most prized possession.

You belong to me and I treasure you. He promises his people will be a kingdom of priests. Now, priests had access to God.

They drew near to God on behalf of the people. And so God would use Israel to draw other nations to himself. And so he also says there will be a holy nation.

[13 : 00] Holy means being set apart or distinct. And so God would want them to be different than all the other surrounding nations. Not different for the sake of it, but different so that they could show how life in this world ought to be lived.

By fully obeying God and by keeping his covenant, Israel would help the world come to a knowledge of the one true and living God.

And this was all part of God's salvation plan. And this is how the apostle Peter actually applies these verses to the church. Listen to what he says in 1 Peter chapter 2.

He says, Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires.

Which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, They may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

[14 : 28] 1 Peter chapter 2. Peter is saying there that living such a good life, Living a life that obeys God, Is how God's people represent God in this world.

In fact, obeying God in today's world is radical. Radical is not disobeying what God says and living a life apart from God.

Because everybody is doing that. In fact, it's so dull and boring because that's all the media will preach to us. Because the majority of people are just unthinkingly sucked into listening to what the cultural elites are saying.

Uncritically and unthinkingly just going along with the flow. If you want to be radical in today's world, Read your Bible and do what it says.

That's radical. Anything else is simply aping the culture and going with the flow. And so to do what God says and to obey what God tells us to do Is really to protest against the fundamental doctrines of our day.

[15 : 40] Because God has always called his people, Whether back then in the Exodus or right now, Always called his people to live lives that will inevitably challenge the norms of the surrounding culture.

Because God wants his people to be light in the darkness. And if you think about it, Most of the people you know who would never darken the door of a church, Most of them will never pick up a Bible and read it.

And yet they will probably read our lives To see whether what we believe and what we seek to do is worth anything. And many people who never encounter God's word will look at us And make their decisions on God based on how we live, How his people live in this world.

And that's what will influence their judgment as to whether God is worth bothering about or not. When George VI was a young boy, Queen Mary, his mother, Would often remind him before a public event, She'd say to him, Bertie, never forget who you are.

He was a royal prince, And so he had to behave accordingly. And in the same way as God's treasured possession, As his royal property, We must never forget who we are.

[17 : 02] And so live then in obedience to God before a watching world. And so meeting with God, What it requires, It requires grace-driven obedience, first of all.

Secondly, why it is serious. Well, it's serious because God is holy. And we see this in verse 9 to 19. Meeting with God is a serious matter.

And this is so clear from all of God's instructions to Moses for the people. The people had to follow certain rules before they could even get close to the mountain.

So verse 9, The Lord said to Moses, I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, So that the people will hear me speaking with you, And will always put their trust in you.

Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. So the cloud, The cloud was a sign of God's presence. God would come towards the people.

[18 : 00] But the awesome nature of this encounter meant The people had to be prepared for God's visit. They had to be consecrated. And we see this in verse 10 and 11.

The Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Make them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day. Because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

So they had to wash their clothes. But this is more than just being neat and tidy. Like when you were younger and your mum was going to take you to visit your granny. And so you had to wash your face and comb your hair and smarten up.

This is far more significant. It is that God is holy and people are sinful. So the washing of clothes was symbolic of the need of cleansing from sin.

Because it is impossible for sinful human beings to meet the holy God. Then they had to wait for three days.

[19 : 04] Which included abstaining from sex. Not because there is anything wrong with sex. But because they had to devote themselves and their attention towards God. And the serious nature of approaching God is further emphasised here by the limits that must be set around the mountain.

Verse 12. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death.

They are to be stoned or shot with arrows. Not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast.

May they approach the mountain. The mountain was holy with God's presence. And so it needed to be fenced off, restricted. It was a no-go zone for the people.

And they had to keep their distance primarily for their own safety. Or they would die. They could only go as God permitted.

[20 : 10] And also they had to wait for the trumpet blast. So there is no way the Israelites could casually saunter on up to God. It wouldn't work. Before they could be anywhere near his presence, God dictated what had to be done, how it had to happen, and when it would happen.

Because there is absolutely no way these sinful people could approach the holy God. It all happens on God's terms.

And you see, if God were not willing to stoop to us, we would never be able to get to him. And so meeting with God is serious because of who he is.

He is holy. And because of who we are, we are sinners. And so just see how this unfolds at the mountain. Verse 16 to 19. On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.

Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God. And they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

[21 : 23] The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace. And the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

So here the Israelites are experiencing the terrifying presence of God. And it made them, even the whole mountain, tremble.

And it was the most awesome display of divine power that anyone up to this point had ever lived through. And there's nothing else quite like it in the Bible, where all the forces of nature are unleashed at the same time.

Thunder, lightning, clouds, smoke, fire, earthquake. It was like a cosmic fireworks display declaring the totally awesome presence, the terrifying presence of God.

And so the Israelites were terrified by what they saw, by what they heard, by what they felt. And no wonder. And so what is all this saying to us about God and about us?

[22 : 30] Well, it's saying loudly and clearly that God is holy, that God's presence is dangerous, and it's impossible for sinful people to get near him.

And yet it's also saying to us that God himself wants to meet with sinful people and wants to be in a special relationship with them.

It's astonishing. People can't approach God because they'll be destroyed. But God wants to approach people to meet with them.

And that's why God sets the rules of engagement here. Listen to what Alec Mateer, in his commentary on Exodus, says about this. He says, fire and cloud are both motifs of the presence of God, each representing different aspects.

He says, like fire, cloud symbolizes the presence of God, but in the sense of the Holy One so shrouding, not abandoning or diminishing his glory, that he could accommodate himself to live among his people, to grace them with a presence which, in its awful holiness, would spell their destruction.

[23 : 48] What he's saying is, God had to shroud himself in the cloud in order to accommodate himself to the people. Because if they encountered the unfiltered glory and holy presence of God, they would be wiped out, destroyed.

And so God shook the mountain with his presence so people would know both that he was holy, therefore they couldn't get near him, but also that he was personal and he wanted to be near them.

And so can you see how a relationship with God is such a serious thing? We must never forget who we're dealing with when we encounter God. And so even if we don't have this kind of awesome, earth-shattering experience that the Israelites did, we should not think that God is any different from this today.

Because he still possesses the same glory, even if we can't see it, even if we don't experience it. And that's why we should never underestimate God, which is the mistake that many people make today, even within the church.

Too many people imagine God to be nothing like the God who is revealed to us in Exodus. They imagine a God who is small, who is weak, who is safe, he's never terrifying, he's never threatening, but that kind of God is just enough to cope with and also easy to ignore.

[25 : 25] And yet what we see here in Exodus is that the true God cannot be tamed, he cannot be domesticated, he cannot be ignored. I think C.S. Lewis illustrates this so well in his book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in a conversation about Aslan.

That's how it goes. Is he a man? Asked Lucy. Aslan, a man? Said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you, he is the king of the wood and the son of the great emperor beyond the sea.

Don't you know who is the king of beasts? Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion. Oh, said Susan. I thought he was a man.

Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. That you will, dearie, and make no mistake, said Mrs. Beaver. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly.

Then he isn't safe, said Lucy. Safe? Said Mr. Beaver. Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good.

[26 : 39] He's the king, I tell you. The God of the Exodus isn't safe. No way. Sinners, as we are, cannot be in the presence of a holy God.

But he is good because he beckons us to himself. And so how is this possible? Our third and final point. Meeting with God, what it requires, why it is serious, and how it is possible.

What is possible through a mediator. Chapter 19 loudly and clearly communicates the holiness of God. The mountain of God's presence was a no-go area for everyone.

Did you see that? For everyone except one man. Moses. Moses was the mediator between the holy God and the sinful people.

Moses even consecrates the people in verse 14. So Moses bridges this gap between these two parties who are completely separated from one another.

[27 : 49] Verse 20 says, the Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the Lord said to him, go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish.

Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them. So can you see the picture here? God is on the summit of the mountain and Israel is camped at the foot of the mountain and Moses as the mediator continually ascends and descends on the mountain.

And here in chapter 19 the emphasis is on the descent where God descends on Mount Sinai and then Moses descends down the mountain to the people.

In fact, the verb in Hebrew is used seven times. The verb to descend. And it simply emphasizes that if people are to meet with God then God has to come down to them.

But for the meeting to take place a mediator is needed. And so Moses had that role. Moses represented God to Israel to the people and so when Moses sorry, when God descended to the top of the mountain to the summit he called Moses up.

[29 : 17] And as their mediator Moses went down from God to Israel with God's words for the people. And so as well as talking with God on behalf of the people Moses alone had this special access to God.

So verse 23 says, Moses said to the Lord the people cannot come up Mount Sinai because you yourself warned us put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.

so only Moses could approach God and talk to God. The people couldn't even approach the mountain because of God's awesome holy presence.

And God repeats this warning three times in this chapter. So the people had to remain down at base camp and yet Moses could go up and down and in and out of God's presence and he does.

And so it emphasizes just how dangerous access to God is without a mediator. A mediator is needed. It is impossible to meet with God without a mediator.

[30 : 23] And so the only way into God's presence as sinful people without being consumed is through the mediator that God provides. And so just like the people of Israel needed a mediator in Moses so we too need a mediator if we are ever to meet with God.

And Jesus Christ is that mediator. And so Moses foreshadows Jesus the greater mediator one who wasn't just close to God like Moses was but one who is God God the Son.

Jesus is God with us. Emmanuel he is the perfect mediator because he is fully God and fully man. And so Jesus came down into this world he descended as a human being to meet us where we are in us from our sin.

There is no other way for any human being to meet with God except through Jesus Christ. And that's what this encounter at Mount Sinai is pointing us towards.

Just listen to how the author of Hebrews puts it in Hebrews chapter 12. He says verse 18 you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire to a darkness gloom and storm to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them because they could not bear what was commanded.

[31 : 58] If even an animal touches the mountain it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said I am trembling with fear but you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God the heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God the judge of all to the spirits of the righteous made perfect to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Saying that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant because it's through the sprinkled blood of Jesus on the cross that our sins are forgiven to make us fit for God's presence.

And this was graphically portrayed when Jesus died. Do you remember what happened to the curtain that hung in the temple as Jesus died on the cross? The curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.

So the curtain was there to separate sinful human beings from the presence of the holy God. And yet at the moment Jesus died the curtain was ripped open.

[33 : 16] It was saying there is now a way into God's presence where we can now meet with God through the work of Jesus on the cross.

God himself made a way because as Jesus died he bore the punishment for our sins in our place.

He was forsaken from the very presence of God on the cross so that we can be welcomed in. And that's why we should never treat our sin lightly or think that we can approach God easily.

It is only possible through the one mediator between God and humanity the man Jesus Christ. So can you see God is holy God is awesome and yet he welcomes us to himself to make us his own to enter into a relationship with us.

Jesus alone makes it possible for you and me to meet with God. Thank God for his grace and his goodness. Thank God for his grace and his goodness.