

The Royal Wedding

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[0 : 0 0] This evening's reading can be found on page 82 of the Pew Bibles, and it's Exodus chapter 24. So Exodus 24.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord.

The others must not come near, and the people may not come up with him. When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice.

Everything the Lord has said, we will do. Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar.

[1 : 1 0] Then he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people. They responded, We will do everything the Lord has said. We will obey. Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you, in accordance with all these words.

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel, went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.

But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites. They saw God, and they ate and drank. The Lord said to Moses, Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.

Then Moses set out with Joshua, his assistant, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them.

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.

[2 : 3 2] To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud, and he went up on the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Let's pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen. I love dinner parties. Those who know me well will know that I like laying the table, and I like making everything look smart and possibly even quite complex and fussy.

And then I like enjoying the delicious food that my wife Susan makes. There may be some people here who remember how about ten years ago there was a dinner party in the city chambers for the church's sesquicentenary.

It's 150th birthday. If you were there, you'd remember the huge paintings on the walls. I can see one person smiling at me now. Though we met and we sat with the counsellors, and Bishop Ian, as he now is, came and shared the gospel in the context of telling the church's story.

[4 : 01] Another special dinner I look forward to every ten years is my, what we call a Gordie, get-together for the alumni of my college, which was Brazenose.

And we meet in the 17th century hall, and I enjoy the candles and the food and the black tie. I enjoy seeing my fellow nose-men, as we call each other.

There may be a less sexist term that the younger people use. I don't know. And when we get together, we see one another. And that's, I suppose, the most important reason why you go.

But actually, in that 20 hours or whatever it is we have, the most exciting bit of that is when we see each other having a meal. And we're going to come later on this evening to one of the great meals of all time, and we'll think about it.

So I'm going to look at the passage that we heard, and I'm going to look at it first by just retelling the story, and then I'll think how it relates to us, not just how it related to them.

[5 : 13] So as we come to Exodus 24, we've had the first half of Exodus. We've seen God's grace in the great deliverance of the Israelites from slavery through the Passover and the Red Sea.

We've seen how they reached Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments and the laws we looked at last week. And now as our passage starts, God calls his people closer to him.

Verse 1, Then the Lord said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel. You, that is, those 74, are to worship at a distance.

But Moses alone is to approach the Lord. The others mustn't come near. And the people may not come with him. I think there are probably three groups there.

Moses is to approach the Lord. Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu. Aaron is Moses' brother, and the other two are Aaron's eldest sons.

[6 : 25] They're to worship at a distance, and then the people are to be further away. They're not to come near at all. As Jonathan was saying earlier, the holiness of God is such as to make it dangerous for sinners to get too close.

Maybe that positioning on the mountain, some getting relatively close, some a bit further away. Further away is a bit like what happens in the tabernacle, when the high priest comes furthest in, the priest some way in, and the people less far in.

But although the people can't get too close, they do respond to God's call. When Moses went, verse 3, and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, everything the Lord has said, we will do.

Perhaps if we looked at the book up to this point, we've had grace, we've had law, and now we've had response. And the heading I've chosen on the notice sheet is, accepting the offer of covenant membership.

Perhaps that's rather a complex phrase. But they say yes to God, yes to his offer. And I think in many ways covenant, although the word isn't used very often in our chapter, is the key concept of the chapter.

[7 : 51] Covenant is a great Bible word. It's a relationship with rights and duties. Malachi speaks of a marriage covenant. And in some ways, the marriage covenant with its rights and duties is a good picture of covenants.

But actually, this covenant is somewhat different. This covenant doesn't imply equality between the two parties who make the covenant. When I want to picture covenants in the Bible, I tend to go back to God's covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, and I find that very helpful.

So I'm just going to read out a bit of it and summarize it for you. So the Lord said to Abram, bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram. Each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

So Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other. The birds, however, he didn't cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

So you've got the bits of dead animal, and I think the implication is, may I suffer the same fate if I break the covenant. And then, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

[9 : 22] On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, to your descendants, I give this land. You see, it's almost quite a one-sided covenant.

Only the Lord passes through. The Lord, symbolized by the firepot, passes between the bits of animal. Abram has a role.

He arranges the bits of animal, and he stops them being eaten by other creatures. But the Lord is the one who takes the initiative.

And the same in our passage. In Exodus 24, it's God who takes the lead. The Lord has brought the Israelites out. That's fundamental. The Israelite response is to obey the law.

And as we see in our passage, they say yes, everything the Lord has said, we will do. They accept the offer of covenant membership.

[10 : 24] Then Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said. Presumably that's the Ten Commandments and the book of the covenant in chapters 21 to 23. I guess otherwise the covenant might not be clear.

Later on, of course, God would give the Ten Commandments in written form. Moses writes, God writes, both true. And after the Israelites have accepted the covenant, then the covenant is sealed in verses 4b to 8.

Moses got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up 12 stone pillars representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

Moses builds this altar that clearly expresses the involvement of all the 12 tribes, the whole of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord.

There are two sorts of offering, two types of offering here. First, there are burnt offerings, which certainly on some occasions were made for atonement of sin.

[11 : 36] Leviticus 1 verse 4 says, you ought to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. And the whole burnt offering was consumed by fire.

So as it was consumed, it perhaps also represented consecration to the Lord, giving the whole of ourselves to God. And then Moses read the book of the covenant and they responded, we'll do everything the Lord has said, we will obey.

They consecrated themselves and promised. And there were the burnt offerings, at least in part for atonement. The fellowship offerings, they celebrate fellowship with God.

Some of the animal was eaten by the priest, some by the worshiper. And then the blood is divided into two parts. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls.

And the other half, he splashed against the altar, verse 6. Half the blood, I think, is for propitiation, to enable the people to come into the presence of a holy God.

[12 : 43] And the other half is used as a sort of covering. It's sprinkled on them. It maintains the relationship between God and his people. He takes the blood and he sprinkles it on the people and says, this is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with these words.

And then something really amazing happens. If you got slightly lost, really come in here at verse 9. Because once the covenant is sealed, this extraordinary thing happens.

Moses and Aaron, verse 9, Nadab and Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Before verse 1, they were to worship, in verse 1, they were to worship at a distance.

Now after the blood has been shed and the covenant has been sealed, they see God. Now this is a complicated verse because the Bible as a whole and the Old Testament in particular is clear that you cannot see God and live.

Exodus 33, well known to say, verse 19, the Lord said, I'll cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I'll proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. But you cannot see my face for no one may see me and live.

[14 : 15] How do the two passages fit together? Well perhaps in our passage they only see in a way the outskirts of God. It only actually refers to God's feet.

Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. Maybe the crucial thing is the sealing of the covenant which has just happened by the shedding of blood.

We don't know. But they saw God. And even if they only saw his feet that was very startling. And they saw the lapis lazuli pavement on which they were placed.

God resides in the heavens and perhaps what is around him is blue. But 11, and this is perhaps the key verse of my whole sermon, but God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites.

They saw God and they ate and drank. They shared communion with him.

[15 : 27] They had already eaten the fellowship offering or were they in fact eating the fellowship offering now. They had dinner with the living God.

They had dinner with the God about whom we've been reading, the God of the plagues and the Passover, the God of Exodus 19 and 20, the God of the Ten Commandments.

I told you at the beginning a couple of stories about dinner parties and they were special for me for location in each case.

Faces like the city chambers. They were special for food. They were special for the company. But on each occasion there were also special people for me to meet.

There were special people at the city chambers where there were the councillors. At my Gordie in Oxford there was the principal and the dons, the lecturers.

[16 : 31] And this meal that they shared, they saw God and they ate and they drank. We're given no details about the meal on Mount Sinai but I'm sure that that meal looks forward to the banquet that will take place when the Messiah comes.

In Isaiah 25 for example verse 6 On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines.

Isn't that a great description of something to look forward to? Or the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19 verse 9 the angel said to me write this blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

I think that this passage we had tonight this event of eating, drinking and seeing helps mark the Exodus story as the most important event in the history of Israel.

Moreover this and Exodus 33 mark out Moses as the Old Testament prophet. There's a level of intimacy here that we don't see elsewhere.

[17 : 50] To exceed this level of intimacy we have to see Jesus who said of himself in John 6 no one has seen the Father except the one who is from God.

Only he has seen the Father. To exceed this passage we need to go to him. So I want to try and sum up the first two thirds of my sermon in our three headings.

Accepting the offer of covenant membership saying yes to God's laws. Sealing the covenant by sacrifice and now enjoying communion with the Lord in verses 9 to 11.

So how does that work for us? What's the relevance of this event for us? And I'm not a great one for turning up another passage. But this evening I want to turn up if you feel like it Hebrews 9 and verse 19.

It's on page 1207. I don't think you'll need to turn back to the other passage. And I want to pick out a few things from it.

[19 : 01] It seems to be a relevant passage because it seems to that the writer of the Hebrews particularly refers to this event in Exodus 24. Verse 19 of Hebrews 9.19.

When Moses had proclaimed every command of the Lord to all the people he took the blood of calves together with water scarlet wool and branches of hyssop and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.

He said this is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you to keep. In the same way this is presumably later he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies.

In fact the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. If you look through chapter 9 and go on further you'll see there's a parallel between the cleansing blood of the power of the blood of the animals and that of the blood of Christ.

But he also wants the writer also wants to show that they are different. verse 24 for example Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that's the tabernacle there was only a copy of the true one he entered heaven itself now to appear for us in God's presence.

[20 : 20] Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again it was a one off Jesus did everything once it doesn't need to be repeated like the priests did. Verse 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.

And just one more verse from Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 22 just over the page let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

our sins have been removed by Jesus' death so that we shall not die eternally but more than that our fellowship with God has been restored we can draw near to him sprinkled with his blood and we enjoy that fellowship with Jesus with God by reading his word and praying in Christian jargon we call that having a quiet time but speaking of eating and drinking our passage surely suggests to us holy communion the Lord's Supper Jesus in many ways picks up our passage when in Luke 22 verse 20 he says it says in the same way after the supper Jesus took the cup saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you I think we can see this eating and drinking on the mountain as foreshadowing holy communion we can also see a foreshadowing in the sense that it talks about seeing God and we certainly see God in the sense that we see him in Jesus we see him in the one who is the word who is the glory of God who makes God known to us so perhaps we might reword my three points and make them accept the offer of covenant membership the covenant has been sealed once and for all and now enjoy communion with the Lord by Bible reading and prayer and holy communion now most of us here have responded to God's gracious call we've accepted

God's covenant membership if you've not yet done so our passage tonight has pointed us to God's grace in delivering his people God's people now is multiracial it's not just one nation anyone can join God's people by faith in Christ who shed his blood that we might be forgiven who shed his blood so that he could sprinkle our hearts that we might enjoy fellowship with God and eat and drink with him if you've not responded and would like to talk have a word with me or one of the staff or almost anyone here afterwards but if you have responded I think I want to use one particular picture of Holy Communion as we think about communion with God and on the screen I'm going to have Horatius Bonner's wonderful hymn for Holy Communion Horatius Bonner great free church leader of the 19th century and here's the first verse here oh my Lord

I see thee face to face here would I touch and handle things unseen here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace and all my weariness upon thee lean there is some special sense in which we see Jesus as we come to communion and the next verse goes on here would I feed upon the bread of God here drink with thee the royal wine of heaven here would I lay aside each earthly load here taste afresh the calm of sins forgiven and then he goes on to look to the new covenant in Jesus' blood mine is the sin but thine the righteousness mine is the guilt but thine the cleansing blood here is my robe my refuge and my peace thy blood thy righteousness O Lord my God and as we go to the next verse I like the fact that in the fourth verse which will come up in a moment communion with God is not limited to the Lord's Supper too soon we rise the symbols disappear the feast though not the love is past and gone the bread and wine removed but thou art here nearer than ever still my shield and sun and as we've already thought any feasting in God's presence is a foretaste of heaven feast after feast thus comes and passes by yet passing points to the glad feast above giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss grace and love my three points just to reiterate accept covenant membership respond to God's gracious call the covenant has been sealed once and for all enjoy communion with the Lord on one's own or with others by his word by prayer and in the Lord's

[26 : 18] Supper let's pray thank you Lord for this astonishing story tonight thank you for their experience on the mountain and the way it points forward to our own experience and on this Advent Sunday we look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus we look forward to the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love thank you Lord Jesus for your death for us thank you that we are sprinkled with your blood Amen thank you thank you thank you for this to our love you thank you for you that you you breast and love

Jesus I love you thank you wow that you come to yourself