

**Ascent**  
**God's Glorious Character and Our Response: Part Two**  
**Exodus 34.8**

**May 22, 2022**

As I said, this message is really part two of the message I preached two weeks ago. That message was titled God's glorious character and our response. Last time we focused on how God revealed his nature and character to his people, and this morning we focus on our response.

Just to remind you, we are in a sermon series on intimacy with God that is called Ascent. The series focuses on a passage that seems unlikely at first – the story of God bringing his people to Mt Sinai and their encounter of him there (recorded for us in Exodus 19 through 34) – but one that actually reveals a lot about what it means for us to draw closer to God.

We've watched over the past two messages how God gathered his people to himself and then revealed his heart, his nature, and his character to them

We saw how intimacy with God begins with **his initiative and his invitation**. God always takes the first step. "You yourselves have seen you how I brought you to myself and carried you on eagle's wings," he says in Exodus 19. Whether approaching God together as his people on Sunday morning, or coming before him for our devotional time on a Tuesday or Friday morning, or at any point throughout the day when we turn to God, God always proceeds us into the moment, and invites us to join him there. God draws near to his people, and then he invites them to draw near to him.

Then we saw how God gave them the **gift of revealing himself to them** so they can know him.

First he reveals his holiness through physical displays – trumpets, fire, clouds, smoke, quaking, the greatest physical forces that people in the ancient Near East might experience – giving them symbolic analogies to what God's holiness and transcendence is like.

He is Holy: unlike them in purity and perfection. There is a line between us and him, between all that his holy and perfect on one side and all that falls short of the glory of God on the other.

Then he reveals his transcendence through experiences for which they have no earthly parallel, giving them visions that leave them groping for something familiar by which to describe it. They see God exalted in the heavens and wrestle to describe what they see in earthly terms, like the precious stone lapis lazuli.

He is Transcendent: unlike them in might and majesty. There is a line between creator and creature, between the maker and all that has been made.

Then passes before Moses: in presence and in speech – we don't know in what physical form – and puts his glory and goodness on display.

He is loving: utterly unlike them in his covenant love and faithfulness. There is a line between those who love in self-seeking ways, in ways that depend upon the performance of the other, and those who love in self-giving ways, in ways that depend only on their own commitment. God is on one side, and we are on the other.

And then God tells his people that he has revealed himself in this way so that they would move toward him in awe.

Exodus 20.21

God has come in this way to show you his awesome power (Living Bible)  
 . . . and instill a deep and reverent awe within you (Message)

God is wanting to show you his holiness, his purity and perfection so that, out of a deep sense of reverence for God, you will continue to seek him and move ever closer to him.

Let me just pause there for a moment and have us think about our own experience of worship. What are we actually about when we gather for worship, or when we pause at the start of the day to honor and worship God by reading scripture and worshiping and praying?

What is that about? Who is it for?

For my edification?

To fulfill a duty?

To meet a need?

To get something to carry me through the week?

This passage reminds us that worship is about something different and deeper than those things.

Our English word “worship” comes from a Middle English word that means “worth-ship.” When we gather in God’s presence, we see that he is worth – what makes him glorious and majestic, what makes him great and what makes him God – and then we give him what he is worth. We give back to him a fitting offering, one that expresses what he is worth to us.

So worship is a face to face encounter with the living God in which we see what he is worth and give him what he is worth. God reveals his nature and character. We see him and we respond.

God has come in this way to show you his awesome power (Living Bible)  
 . . . and instill a deep and reverent awe within you (Message) (Exodus 20.21)

Moses gives us a great example of what it looks like to respond to God with awe and reverence. We find it in Exodus 34, after God has passed before Moses in all of his glory and goodness.

Let's look at how Moses responds to the self-revelation of God

Exodus 34.8

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.

### **1. at once Moses**

The phrase "at once" is in the place of emphasis in the passage.

You get the sense that he can't help himself. He finds himself thrown to the ground in awe.

God walks through our midst, and we cannot help but respond.

This is a great reminder that God by his spirit is our worship leader. Not the folks up here on the platform. He is the one who leads us in our response to him. He initiates, and we respond.

### **2. at once Moses bowed down and worshiped**

Some words seem to be made to come in pairs.  
 Tried and true. Strait and narrow. Peanut butter and jelly.

Throughout the Old Testament, these two terms, "bowing down" and "worshiping", almost always come together. Think of Psalm 95.6: "Come, let us worship and bow down."

Interestingly, both words mean pretty much exactly the same thing. They describe a body position: bowing down. It describes the position of a man in the wilderness who comes across water in a stream, so he gets down on his hands and knees and puts his mouth to the water.

Those from the Middle and Far East will have a much better understanding of that posture than those of us of European descent.

When we in the West speak of bowing, we think of a graceful little bend at the waist, a charming smile on our upturned faces, a gesture of exaggerated politeness but little more.

But that is the wrong picture. It means bending down, lowering yourself, bowing down to the ground, The biblical idea of bowing is lowering your head all the way to the ground: getting down on your hands and knees and then bending down until you are touching your forehead to the ground.

*This* is what bowing down means. Face on the ground. When God passed before him, this is what Moses did: bowed down and worshiped.

The meaning of this connects back to the way people related to kings on the throne. When a king sat on a throne, he put his feet on a footstool. That footstool represented all that was under the king's power and rule.

If I am your king, if I rule over you, I have the right to make use of you in whatever way I want. Your life is in my hands.

So bowing down was a way of putting my head under your feet in a way of acknowledged your rightful rule over me.

That imagery is picked up, for example, in Joshua 10.24: "come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings," in Psalm 8.6 "you made him ruler over the works of your hands – you put everything under his feet", and especially in Psalm 110.1, which speaks of making one's enemies "a footstool for your feet."

On a Seminary in Suitcase trip to Cairo I had the opportunity to visit the archeology museum. One of the most striking things I saw among King Tutankhamun's possessions was a pair of his sandals. On the in-soles of each foot were painted two bound prisoners. One dark skinned and the other lighter, they clearly were meant to represent his nearest neighbors to the north and south. Every time he took a step, then, he symbolically trampled on his enemies. Feet convey dominion: my foot on the neck of another.

So why use two words with the same meaning? Though both words conjure the same image, they each have to do with a different realm of the person. Where the first word, "bow down," has to do with what your body is doing, the second word, "worship," has to do with what your heart is doing. If "bow down" is the *bodily* act of prostration, "worship" is the *heart* act that goes with it.

Either without the other will be less than what God intends. So let's explore them both.

We'll look at the second word first, the one that has to do with the posture of our heart in worship, because that is the one that matters most of all.

#### 4. Moses bowed down *and worshiped* (attitude – posture of the heart)

When God tucked Moses in a cleft in the mountain side and then passed before him, revealing but the smallest glimpse of his glory and goodness, we're told that "Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped." (Exodus 34.8).

There are three layers of meaning to this word for bowing our hearts down in worship.

1. The first has to do with how I see God: By bowing down, I lift you up. I exalt you, I lift you high. Your holiness, your transcendence, your love – I see the beauty of these attributes of yours. I'm moved to praise you, extol you, celebrate you, bless you, give you thanks. I see you *truly*, accurately, for who you are.

2. The second has to do with how I lower myself before you. I placing myself *beneath* your glory. Compared to your majesty and glory, compared to your beauty and love, I realize that I am nothing. There is no aspect of me or anyone else that is equal to you in any way. In all the wide landscape of existence you are without rival or equal. You alone are worthy. I see myself in *true proportion* to you.

3. The third dimension has to do with how I see myself in *right relationship* with you: I place myself *under* your rule. You are the one and only king. You reign over me and all else. I crown you and I place myself under your rule and authority. My worship is an act of surrender, offering myself to you as your subject and placing myself in your service. I realize that what you are worth is all of me – all that I am, all that I have.

Bowing down is a posture of making yourself available as a subject to a king, as a slave to a master. I belong to you. You are deserving of anything you might ask of me – my time, my worship, my service, my life. I am yours.

I was just talking to Dylan, my son in law, over the weekend. He just finished a 25 page paper on the kingdom of God, and he said the thing that struck him most is that the kingdom of God not so much a realm, not a domain that belongs to God, but it is his reign and rule, it is where he reigns as king and others recognize his kingly claims on their lives.

When we bow in worship, we acknowledge God's rightful rule and reign over us.

There's an interesting expression that you find all through the Old Testament – including right in the middle of this story, in Exodus 32.9, 33.3, and 33.5 – that describes the opposite of this posture of the heart.

It's when people are described as being stiff-necked. I may be bowing my body, but I refuse to bow my heart before you, to submit to your rule, to honor you in a way that is your due.

Moses worshiped. In response to God's revelation of himself, Moses gave his heart and life over to God.

That brings us to the other word in this word pair, the one that describes what the body was doing.

### **3. Moses *bowed down* (position of the body) and worshiped.**

In our interactions with each other, what we do with our bodies conveys what is going on in our hearts toward each other: how we view them, how we value them.

Two examples:

Leviticus 19.32: Stand up in the presence of the elderly (see also I Peter 5.5)  
Standing up as a way of showing honor to an older person

II Corinthians 13.12: Greet one another with a holy kiss.  
Openly showing affection to a brother or sister in Christ

We use our bodies to show what is going on in our hearts.

Imagine hugging someone who just stands there stiff as a board in reply.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m hugging you in my mind.”

It is interesting that, even though God does not have a body, and is not located in one specific place, that same idea of showing with our bodies what is going on in our hearts carries over in our relationship with the Lord.

Consider these invitation to involve our bodies in our worship.

Standing Psalm 24.3 Who may stand in his holy place?

Bowing Psalm 95.6 Come, let us worship and bow down.

Kneeling Psalm 95.6 Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.

Dancing Psalm 149.3 Let them praise his name with dancing.

Clapping Psalm 47.1 Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.

Lifting hands Psalm 63.4 I will praise your name as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. (both lifting hands to give and lifting hands to receive)

Using our bodies in worship is a biblical idea.

1. Matthew 22.29 Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

2. And the psalms: stand, bow, lift hands, kneel, bow down

Sometimes my heart takes its cue from my body, and sometimes the other way around.

We are not souls in boxes of flesh. We can wrongly understand the New Testament antithesis of flesh and spirit to mean that our bodies are a less good or less valuable part of us. But we are embodied souls – our bodies are part of who we are. Think about that fact that when Jesus returns we will be given new physical bodies. We will not be mere souls, floating in the presence of God, but embodied souls. Our bodies are an important part of us.

The scriptures invite us to use our bodies in our worship.

The goal is not emotionalism. It's not to try to get everyone to respond in the same way. This is an invitation to *engagement*. Moving us from spectating to participating, and moving from recounting to encounter.

This isn't an answer to the question: What am I supposed to do? But to the question What is God inviting me to do?

I still remember my first time raising my hands in worship. Juan Carlos Ortiz came and preached at College Hill on worship, and he taught on these passages in the psalms and invited us to respond in whatever way seemed appropriate. I remember looking around self-consciously and then closing my eyes and raising my hands. What I discovered is that it just engaged me more fully in my worship, allowing me to shift more meaningfully from "He is" to "You are."

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**Moses bowed down at once and worshiped. (Exodus 34.8)**

I've shared with you before these excerpts written by Jeanne Guyon in her little book *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer*.

Turn your heart to the presence of God.  
As you come to him, humbly acknowledge that he is everything.  
Confess to him that you are nothing.

Give yourself up to God. Acknowledge before him his right to rule over you.

Surrender your heart into his hands.  
Surrender your freedom into his hands.  
Yield to the Lord His right to do with you as he pleases.

Abandonment is the key to the inner court – the key to the fathomless depths.  
Abandonment is the key to the inward spiritual life.  
Surrender yourself to be led by God.