

God's Sacrificial Provision and Our Response
Exodus 24.1-22, 33.6-7a, Hebrews 9.11-10.14, 4.14-16
Communion

May 29

You all know my love of flying.

During our nine years of living in Colorado Springs, I remember several times when I took Brandon and Sean with me when they were still little kids and we drove over to the Air Force Academy to watch the military jet flyover before a football game.

We would join the long line of cars filing in through the Southgate entrance, inch our way north along Stadium Boulevard, and then find a place to park in the huge lot that surrounded Falcon stadium.

Falcon Stadium Flyover



Then while everyone else lined up to go inside we would go around to the south end of the stadium and look down towards Cheyenne Mountain and watch the waves of F-4s and F-15s and F-16s and A-10s and B-1Bs and B-2s and C-130s and C-5s as they flew over the stadium. It was so cool.

Then, as the game started behind us, we would turn to leave. We didn't have tickets. And as a family in ministry with four young kids, we couldn't begin to afford them.

Then one day, after the flyover, as we were turning to go, a man walked up to us and said, "Hey, would you guys like some tickets to get in and see the game?"

"Hey, I really appreciate it," I said. "That'd be a lot of fun. But we can't afford them. We just came up to watch the flyover. But thanks."

"No, no. Here," he said, and handed us three tickets. "You can have them. Enjoy the game."

The three of us turned wide eyed and stared at each other.

Then we walked up to the gate, handed in our tickets, passed through the gates, and took our seats alongside the other 46,000 people who had gathered for the game, taking part in something we had no business taking part in. From the inside.

We find ourselves in the middle of a sermon series called *Ascent*, in which we are following Moses into deeper intimacy with God by exploring the fascinating account in Exodus chapters 19 to 34 of God bringing his people to Mt Sinai and then making himself known to them there.

There are lots of different dimensions to this story, but here's the essence of it. God brings his people to himself in order that they might worship him and enjoy fellowship with him.

The part of the story we are focusing on today is the part told in the first eleven verses of Exodus 24.

Just to remind you of where we've been, our study of this story shows us that God has taken the initiative in every aspect of our relationship with him. He takes the initiative to bring his people to himself, drawing near to us. He takes the initiative to extend an invitation to them to draw near to him, to come into his presence. He takes the initiative to reveal himself to his people – to make known his nature, his character, and his heart.

Today we explore another crucial dimension of God's initiative in his dealings with his people. That is his initiative in overcoming the seemingly insurmountable barriers that stand between us and him.

You remember that once he brought them to Mt Sinai, God revealed to Moses and the Israelites some stunning glimpses of his holiness, his transcendence, and his love.

In each case, even as he makes himself known, a line is drawn that separates him from his people. He is holy, we are not. He is transcendent and self-sufficient, we are not. He is perfect in his love, and we are not.

We are unlike God. God is unlike us. We are far from him.

In Exodus 20.20 Moses tells God's people why God has given them these glimpses of himself. He wants to give them 20/20 vision, to help them to see him clearly so they can respond appropriately.

In Exodus 20.20-21

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come in this way to show you his awesome power and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin." [The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.]

But there is an understandable opposite reaction that wells up in God's people as they are confronted with these glimpses of God's nature, his character, and his heart. It's a reaction not of awe and reverence but of conviction, and of fear.

John Calvin reminds us that whenever we see God more clearly, we will always see ourselves more clearly as well. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he says that "without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self":

It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. . . .

As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. [But suppose we] begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power – the straightedge to which we must be [conformed]. Then, what masquerad[ed] earlier as righteousness [and seemed] pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate [corruption].

As a consequence, we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty. (*Institutes* 1.1.2-3)

This accounts for why, when God invites his people to draw near, they want to back farther away.

What gets revealed in us against the backdrop of God's moral purity and perfection are two fatal problems: our guilt and our shame.

Guilt. There is something wrong with what we do. We sin. We do wrong. We cross over God's lines, we fall short of God's standard. We hurt God and others by things we do and things we fail to do.

Shame. There is something wrong with who we are. We are bent and broken as people, far from purity and perfection. It is our very nature to reject God's rightful place in our lives and to take over that place for ourselves. Who we are falls short of the glory of God and offends God's perfect character.

That's why, when God invites his people to step closer, they step further away. Because in giving them glimpses of himself, he gives them glimpses of themselves too.

Exodus 20.18-19

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Exodus 20.20-21

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come in this way to show you his awesome power and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin." The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

It's the same reaction we see in Isaiah, when he comes face to face with God.

Isaiah 6.1-5

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. ² Attending him were mighty seraphim . . . ³ They were calling out to each other,
 "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts!
 The whole earth is filled with his glory!"

⁴ Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts."

And it's the same reaction we see in Peter, when he comes face to face with the divine power of Jesus when Jesus performs a miracle.

Luke 5.1-9

⁸ When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." ⁹ For he

was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him.

When we see God clearly, we see ourselves clearly, and we realize we have no business being near him. We have no basis for right standing in God's holy presence. We are morally disqualified.

We don't belong inside the stadium.

Which makes what happens in Exodus 24 at Mt Sinai so amazing and significant, and makes what the gospels tell us happened at Golgotha 1500 years later even more amazing and significant.

Just as God takes the initiative to bring his people to himself, and invite them near, and make himself known to them, so God takes the initiative *to make provision for us* in spite of our being so completely and utterly disqualified.

So let's look at what unfolds in the first eleven verses of Exodus chapter 24.

Before I read the story, I do want to highlight one word that shows up twice in the middle of the story: the word "covenant." You see it in verse 7, when Moses reads from the book of the covenant, and then again in verse 8. when Moses sprinkles the people with the blood of the covenant.

Everything that happens in chapter 24 is about God's *covenant* with his people.

The idea of a covenant is so significant in God's dealings with his people that it's important we spend a little bit of time to understand what a covenant is.

In its simplest form, a covenant is a *commitment* in the context of a *relationship*.

But as soon as I say that, it's important that we recognize there are two *really* different kinds of covenants in the ancient world, as different as a compact signed between nations and a compact a woman carries in her purse. They are so different they really should have different names.

The kind of covenant God forms with his people in the Bible is never the first kind, and is always the second kind.

The first kind of covenant is a deal between two equal partners, like two business associates.

The *relationship* they have is one of equals, and the *commitment* they each make is to carry out their side of the deal, sharing the cost together, each of them giving something to gain something else in return.

The other kind of covenant is a treaty between two utterly unequal parties, between a conquering king and a vanquished foe. That's the kind of covenant we encounter here.

In this kind of covenant, the *relationship* they have is between one person with all the power and resources and the other person with none, and the *commitment* that's made is a commitment that the person in power makes on behalf of both parties, and which is merely accepted with gratitude by the other party.

The King promises to himself and to them that he will protect them, and provide for them, and be present and available to them, at cost to himself, and all his subjects need to do is respond to him with gratitude by accepting his provision and giving him their complete allegiance.

Whenever a covenant is enacted, the same elements are always present. The history of the relationship between the two parties is recounted, the expectations that are to be met by both parties are written down and read, the benefits of keeping the covenant and the costs of failing to keep it are enumerated, and then a copy of the covenant is made for both parties. After that, the covenant agreement is sealed between the two parties by eating a covenant meal together.

The first eleven verses of Exodus 24 are the story of God and his people agreeing together to the covenant arrangement that God is making with them.

Let's listen to what happens.

Exodus 24.1-2

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel [representing the rest 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."

Exodus 24.3-4

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.

Exodus 24.4-5

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.

Exodus 24.6-7

Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. 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."

Exodus 24.8

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."

Before we read the last three verses, let me pause here. Why the offerings? Why the sacrifices? Why the sprinkling with blood?

A holy God has called his people to himself, and now he invites them into a covenant relationship with himself.

But there is not just an inequity of *power* between God and his people, there is a *moral* imbalance, a moral inequity too. There is a huge chasm between God's perfect moral character and the sin and corruption that touches every part of every one of us as his people – there's an inequity inequity.

And immoral humanity cannot stand in the presence of holy God. My sin is an affront to God's moral purity and perfection. I cannot approach him on the basis of my own merit. I'm utterly disqualified. The line, the gulf, between us is too great.

And, in fact, the fitting and proportionate penalty for my sin, for my rejecting God's rightful place in my life and riding roughshod over his moral boundaries, is my own life.

And either I need to bear that penalty myself, or, in order for me to live, in order for me to stand in God's presence, something must die in my place.

And this is the stunning part of God's initiative we are looking at today.

God doesn't just take the initiative to bring his people to himself, and to invite them to draw near, and to reveal his nature and character to them. God takes upon himself the burden of the moral gap that stands between us and God, and keeps us from being able to approach him.

God makes gracious provision. God establishes a means by which sinful humanity can approach him in all of his purity and perfection.

The provision is called *substitutionary atonement*. Something or someone else is offered in my place, bearing the penalty that is my due.

It's based on the principle that is captured in Hebrews 9.22

The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

That's what the sacrificial system is all about.

And being sprinkled with blood from the sacrifice is a way of showing that we are recipients of the benefits that the shed blood provides. That we stand under the mercy. And that rather than running from God in fear, because of his sacrificial provision we can now approach him in reverent awe, and enjoy his holy presence.

The people offer burnt offerings, to atone for their sin *against* God. And they offer fellowship offerings, to celebrate the friendship they enjoy *with* God.

Listen to the remarkable end to the story.

Exodus 24.9-11

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.

As we said earlier, eating a meal together is a sign of both parties committing to the covenant agreement. But even more, in Near Eastern culture, eating a meal together is a sign of fellowship, of friendship, of shared connection and affection.

The God of the universe, mighty, majestic, pure, perfect, has brought his people to the foot of his mountain. With startling displays of power, with smoke and fire and earthquakes and trumpet blasts, he has put his holiness and transcendence on display.

Then, having drawn the starkest of lines between his holy character and our sinful character, between his transcendent nature as Creator and our dependent nature as creatures – he obliterates those lines, throws out his arms, and welcomes us to his table.

Remember the basic story board of this encounter between God and his people at Mt Sinai? God brings his people to himself, that they might worship him and enjoy fellowship with him.

Travel forward 1500 years from Mt Sinai to the hill outside of Jerusalem called Golgotha, on which Jesus offers his life on the cross.

Listen now to Hebrews 9 and 10 that describe the fulfillment, the completion, the consummation of the sacrificial system that God put in place in order for us to be able to enjoy fellowship with a holy God.

Hebrews 9

¹¹ But when Christ came ... he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he

entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

Hebrews 9.13-14

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

¹⁹ When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law 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. ²⁰ He said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” ²¹ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. ²² In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Hebrews 10

⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

¹⁰ We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Now – through Christ – the ability to approach God is not reserved for a few, but is open to all of us, and it's based not on the flimsy footing of a series of inadequate ritual sacrifices that have to be made over and over, but on a once and for all sacrifice of the covenant maker himself.

With this passage this whole story suddenly becomes profoundly personal. We step out of ancient history and into the present moment, and we step out of someone else's story and into our own.

Paul describes where every one of us found ourselves spiritually before we encountered Christ, when he writes in

Ephesians 2

¹¹ Remember that formerly . . . you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

But then one day, as we stood outside the gate, unable to gain entry, the Son of Man strolled into human history, walked up to us and said, "Would you like to get in? Would you like to have a seat? I'll pay the way."

Ephesians 2.13

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2

¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

God himself invites us into intimate fellowship with himself. God himself invites us to his table. If we have accepted God's covenant invitation, if we have given our allegiance to Jesus, then we have been "sprinkled with his blood," as Peter says, and "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all," as the writer of Hebrews says.

God invites us, as forgiven, accepted, and beloved partners in the covenant, into a relationship of intimacy with himself, a relationship of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved, of abiding in and abiding with, and God's initiative makes that intimacy with him possible.

He takes those of us who were outside, who had no way in, and he paid the penalty himself, all the cost falling upon himself, in order that we who were far away might come near, that we who were outside might come in.

Through the gift of his own son he opens the way for us into a place of friendship and fellowship, a place of connection and affection, with himself.

So this becomes God's invitation to each of us this morning.

Hebrews 4.14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. . . . Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The atoning sacrifice of Jesus in our place is what lets us approach the throne of grace with confidence as forgiven people rather than holding back or running away in our guilt and shame.

We can come to God joyfully, confidently, even in our weakness and our brokenness, in our sin and in our failure, because God himself, the God of grace and compassion, has made provision for us and opened the way.

George Herbert captures the utterly unexpected and utterly undeserved invitation perfectly when he writes (in his poem called Love (III))

**Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.**

**A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
 I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?**

**Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.**

Have you accepted God's gracious gift? Have you stepped through the door that Jesus opens into the heart of God? Have you put your trust in him, and given him your allegiance?

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that we will receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.