



**ASCENT: Following Moses Up the Path to Deeper Intimacy with God  
Part One: God's Gracious Invitation and Our Response  
Exodus 19.1-25, 24.1-2 (19.20)**

**May 1, 2022**

**Intro**

Many of you know I was an atheist all through middle school and high school and college, not becoming a follower of Christ until my senior year in college. But church wasn't foreign to me. I grew up going to church every Sunday.

But I guess in another sense church was foreign to me, in that I always felt like an outsider in the worship service. Every Sunday I'd go up and sit in the balcony and hold my breath until the service was over and we could go get donuts. Trying to while away the time I'd count the lightbulbs in the chandeliers, or I'd pull the nickel or dime out of my pocket that I had for the offering plate and tilt it in the light to try to make Jefferson or Roosevelt grin.

If you had asked me as a kid or teenager why we gathered on Sunday mornings for worship services, I'm not sure I could have given you a good answer. I didn't understand a thing that was going on up there. It was boring interminable music followed by a boring incomprehensible message.

Why did we go to church? Why did we attend services?

Because we were supposed to?

Because somebody thought it would be good for us?

Because God required it of us?

It's interesting even thinking about what that language suggests.

Going to church? As if church was a place or an event instead of a group of people?

Attending services? As if the service itself was the thing that mattered.

How would you answer that? Why do we gather for worship every Sunday morning?

But what if someone had said, No, the heart of what happens when the church gathers for worship is meant to be an *encounter* between the living God and his people. Yes, God is invisible, but He is present and involved and alive and near, and when we as his

people gather in his presence, he meets us, and he gives us the eyes of faith to see him in our midst, and he moves us to give him the glory and honor that are his due.

It's the thing we say in some form every Sunday at the start of our service.

God is here

He invites us into his presence

Our prayer is that you would encounter him, the living, present, risen Lord

In the book of Exodus there is a story that unfolds at a mountain peak deep in the Egyptian peninsula that I think is meant to establish a paradigm for the way we think about what it means to approach God in worship, not only each week when we come together in the sanctuary, but also each day when we worship God in our homes, and all throughout each day wherever it is that God takes us.

Our call as a church is to live a life of love. And while that includes loving one another, and loving our neighbor, it begins and ends with loving God.

So learning about how we approach God in worship and how to grow in intimacy with God is central to what God has called us to as his people.

The story unfolds over the space of about a dozen chapters, starting in chapter 19 of Exodus, weaving back and forth between the story, and God's laws, more of the story, more laws and instructions from God, and so on.

God is bringing his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. But the part of the story we are looking at tells about the first stop on that long winding route across the wilderness. It's the story of God bringing his people to Mt Sinai, and what happens next.

Mt Sinai is not some random stop on the wandering route from Egypt to the Promised Land. Mt Sinai, also called Mt Horeb in the Old Testament, happens to be the exact same place we read about in Exodus 3 where God appeared to Moses in flames of fire (Exodus 3.1-4).

It turns out that this purple granite peak located in what we know today as the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt is God's home address. He has brought his people to his own front door.

Now obviously, if God is the maker of heaven and earth, as it says in Psalm 146.6, and if heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool, as it says in Isaiah 66.1, and if God is spirit, and not confined to any one physical place, but is present to all places equally, as it says in John 4.24, then we have to understand the idea that God *lives* on Mt Sinai as a convention that God establishes to make himself present to his people.

It is meant to be understood *symbolically* as the place where God lives.

So if Mt Sinai represents God's home, his bringing his people there, and what happens next, is so instructive about some of the things that matter most to God and are most on his heart.

This morning what I'd like to do is just to focus on the invitation that is at the heart of this passage. And then over the next month and a half we'll be opening up other aspects of the passage as well.

So let's listen to the first part of the story, which we find in Exodus 19 and parts of Exodus 20.

### **Exodus 19.1-6**

<sup>1</sup> On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

<sup>3</sup> 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: <sup>4</sup> 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

### **Exodus 19.7-13**

<sup>7</sup> So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. <sup>8</sup> The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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."

### **Exodus 19.14-25**

<sup>14</sup> After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. <sup>15</sup> Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. <sup>19</sup> As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

<sup>20</sup> The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up

<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

<sup>23</sup> 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.'"

<sup>24</sup> The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them." <sup>25</sup> So Moses went down to the people and told them.

### **Exodus 20.18-21**

<sup>18</sup> 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 <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you [let you experience this], so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

<sup>21</sup> The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

There is much that gets revealed about God during this encounter between God and his people, and between God and Moses specifically.

What I'd like to focus on this morning is what is revealed about God's *heart* when he brings Moses and his people to his mountain.

At first glance, the way we encounter God in this passage can seem daunting, offputting, forbidding. The smoke billowing, the mountain shaking, the trumpet sounding, the fire blazing – all of that overwhelming expression of the transcendence and holiness of God can seem like God is expressing something other than a heart of welcome for his people.

But looking closer at the passage, I think you see something really different.

God has not just brought them to his mountain to give them his rules, or to give them his blueprints. God has invited them to his mountain to give them himself.

This is a profoundly relational and personal meeting of God with his people.

## 1. God initiates

First notice the way that God is the one who initiates this encounter, as he does every encounter we will ever have with him.

Listen again to the language God uses in verses 4 through 6 of chapter 19.

Exodus 19.4-6

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how **I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.** <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> **you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'**

They are at Mt Sinai at God's initiative.

His effort – I carried you on eagles' wings (4)

In the book of Deuteronomy 32.9-11 the familiar image of the eagle swooping in to protect its young and carrying them off to safety is elaborated on in a beautiful way

<sup>9</sup> For the LORD's portion is his people,  
Jacob his allotted inheritance.

<sup>10</sup> In a desert land he found him,  
 in a barren and howling waste.  
 He shielded him and cared for him;  
 he guarded him as the apple of his eye,  
<sup>11</sup> like an eagle that stirs up its nest  
 and hovers over its young,  
 that spreads its wings to catch them  
 and carries them aloft.

His initiative – I brought you to myself (4)

His heart to be in a committed relationship with us as his people – inviting them to be in a covenant relationship with him (5)

A covenant is a relationship of mutual commitment, each one giving the other one their exclusive allegiance and pledging to be faithful to one another  
 – more on that in a few weeks

His choice – you will be my treasured possession (5)

The idea is of a choice that expresses the heart's deepest desire – out of all those I could have chosen, I chose you

His desire, that we would be his people, made distinctive from all other people by his choice of us, representing him in this world – you will be *for me* a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (6)

Again and again God expresses the way he has taken the initiative

I carried you, I brought you, I initiated a relationship with you, I committed myself to you, I chose you, I want you for my own

And then when the people of God arrive at the mountain, again he takes the first step, opening his heart to be in relationship with us

### **Exodus 19.20**

*The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up.*

The God of the universe draws near so that we can draw near to him.

The Lord always steps down in order to step near, a pattern, as we'll see in just a minute, which finds its fullest expression in his coming to us as a human being

There is never a time when we will step toward God when he hasn't already stepped toward us first.

My best friend, Danny, who I've known for almost forty years, lives about nine hours from here, down in North Carolina. We try to connect on the phone on a regular basis,

but it's not the same as when we're in person. So a couple of years ago I asked if he would be willing to meet me halfway between us for a day. Then I rented a tree house cabin in the Red River Gorge, filled a cooler with some food, and headed down to Lexington. Then he drove up and met me. Yes, he had to make the drive, but everything else had been done for him in order to give us both the chance to get some time together.

What would it mean for you to carry that perspective into our Sunday morning worship, and your daily devotional time, and the times you approach him throughout the day?

As an expression of the depth of his covenant love for us, God takes the initiative. He moves toward us first. God makes all the arrangements. He draws near to us.

God initiates. We love because he first loved us.

## **2. God invites**

And then, having taken the initiative in his relationship with us, he invites us. He extends an invitation to us.

I have drawn near to you. Draw near to me.

God says, "Come."

### **Exodus 19.20**

The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai *and called Moses to the top of the mountain*. So Moses went up.

Every time we gather for worship, we come *at his invitation*.

Each Sunday, each morning, throughout each day, we receive an invitation, "The King of the Universe, the Lord of heaven and earth, requests the honor of your presence."

Throughout the corridors of the ages, and in every corner of this earth, rings the whisper of God saying to his people, "Come." We'll hear it repeated again and again in the next part of the story.

### **Exodus 24.1**

Then the LORD instructed Moses: "Come up here to me."

### **Exodus 24.12**

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain."

God desires to be in ever-deepening relationship with us. Wherever we are, he desires to draw us from that point to a point even nearer to him.

Have you ever wondered about why, in the middle of this story of Moses's encounter with God on Mt Sinai, why, smack dab in the middle of that story, God takes six chapters to share the blueprint for the tabernacle and the org chart for the priesthood?

Because the whole point of the tabernacle is to have a regular place to be able to respond to God's invitation to come to him! The tabernacle is a meeting place, a place to draw near to God, and for God to draw near to us.

When you combine together the affectionate language with which God describes his initiative - I carried you, I brought you, I initiated a relationship with you, I committed myself to you, I chose you, I want you for my own – with his words of invitation – come, draw near to me – what you are left with is evidence that God's desire is for *intimacy* with his people.

Intimacy is depth of relationship, closeness of connection, a bringing together of two hearts.

God doesn't just want what we give him, or do for him. Come, make your deposit, pay your due, then be on your way. He wants our *hearts*. And he offers us his own heart of affection in return.

So much is this the case that, from early on, church fathers like Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux saw in the Bible book the Song of Solomon, a song originally written to celebrate the affection and delight of a husband and wife for one another – they also saw it as a book rightly understood as a celebration of the affection and delight between God and his people.

The mystical description in Ephesians 5 of the relationship of God and the church being like the relationship between a husband and wife certainly encourages that interpretation.

One of the favorite passages of the early fathers to capture God's loving invitation to his people is this one in

### **Song of Solomon 2.10**

My beloved spoke and said to me,  
 "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come away with me."

How would it change your experience of corporate worship if that was the way you heard God's invitation to come into his presence? If that was the invitation that came to your ears at the start of each day?

### **3. God introduces**

God takes the *initiative* to bring us near.  
 God extends the *invitation* for us to draw close.



And then, in love, God *introduces* into the fullness of His blessing for us as his people.

God is not a skimpy God. The life he has for us is a life of richness and fullness.

As he says at the end of the portion of the story we've been looking at today,

Exodus 20.24

Wherever I cause my name to be honored, **I will come** to you and bless you. It is the heart of God to bless those he chooses and draws to himself, to pour out on them every spiritual blessing.

That dimension of God's heart is captured in the words of Isaiah 55, when God through the prophet reiterates his invitation to God's people to "come" four different times. Listen to the lavish language, the language of exuberance and abundance connected with God blessing us.

Isaiah 55.1-3

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me;  
hear, that your soul may live;  
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love.

God throws wide open the doors to the banquet, making available to us every blessing – not only the blessing we receive in what God does for us, but the blessing we receive in who God is for us, the blessing of God himself.

Psalms 63.1-3 is, in many ways, a response to that invitation and others like it.

<sup>1</sup> You, God, are my God,  
earnestly I seek you;  
I thirst for you,  
my whole being longs for you,  
in a dry and parched land  
where there is no water.  
<sup>2</sup> I have seen you in the sanctuary  
and beheld your power and your glory.  
<sup>3</sup> Because your love is better than life,  
my lips will glorify you.  
<sup>4</sup> I will praise you as long as I live,

and in your name I will lift up my hands.  
<sup>5</sup> I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;  
 with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

God initiates the relationship, God invites us to draw, and God introduces us to the fullness of his blessing.

How would it change your view of worship if you heard God inviting you to come to him in order that he might bring you into the fullness of his blessing?

#### **4. God incarnates his initiative, his invitation, and his introduction.**

But there's one more part of this story of God's invitation into intimacy with him.

It's one that plays out not on Mt Sinai, in the wilderness of Sin, but on a hill called Golgotha outside the city walls of Jerusalem about 1500 years later.

When God brought the Israelites to Mt Sinai, God revealed absolutely crucial dimensions of his nature and character, and laid a crucial foundation for his relationship with his people.

But the story does not end there. Mt Sinai was a starting but not a completing, an anticipating but not a fulfilling. There is a crucial second and final chapter to the relationship of God with his people.

In the Jewish era, when God began to make himself known, the nearest that God came was to the top of a mountain in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. But then came the Christian era, when God took the initiative to draw near in a whole new way, by coming to us in human form.

John 1.14 and 18

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>16</sup> Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.  
<sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

And God in human form, having taken the initiative to draw near to us, invites us to draw near to him.

Listen to these words as his invitation to you today.

**Matthew 11.28-30**

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

**Mark 6.31**

Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

It's an invitation not just for adults, not just to those have a place of importance in this world, but to people of all ages.

**Mark 10.14**

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

It turns out that, when we get to the top of the mountain of redemptive history, this is what we see.

**Image of Christ the Redeemer Statue**

In the incarnation God stretches out his arms in wide welcome to this world.

In the incarnation God takes the initiative and draws near to us.

In the incarnation God extends the invitation and invites us to draw near to him.

And in the incarnation God opens wide his arms and introduces us to the fullness of his blessing.

As Jesus says in John 10.10

I have come that you may have life – abundant life, life to the full.

As Paul says in Ephesians 1.5,  
Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in  
the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Jesus opens his arms to receive us. Jesus opens his arms to extend every blessing to  
us.

Have you run into those arms?

With each new Sunday morning, when we gather as God's people, and with each new  
day, as we come before God alone, and with each new moment, as God walks with us  
through the day, God stands before you, his arms wide, and says, Come

He spread his arms out in death and says, I have come that you may have life. Come.  
And he spreads his arms out in life and says, Come to me that you may have life.  
Come.

Wherever you find yourself  
In the midst of whatever you are facing  
Regardless of how you may feel about yourself  
No matter how you got where you are  
No matter how weary you are, and no matter how overwhelming your circumstances

Jesus says, who loves us and laid down his life for us, says, Come,

How He Loves