

## The Blessing of God's Presence

Exodus 20:22-26

There is one very distinct memory I have from my childhood family-life that reflects the stability with which I grew up. I was the youngest of six children, so my mother worked hard just to provide for our needs. Chief among her labors, I suspect, was providing meals. And what I remember, from my earliest years, was dinner time. Every night at 6 o'clock, we all sat down at the table together, an overgrown table made out of a large sheet of plywood put together by my father. Sometimes it doubled as a ping-pong table. I sat in the middle on one side. We all had our assigned seats. Every night. And at the head of the table sat my father. Every night. No matter how busy the family schedule became, no matter what everyone was doing all day, we sat down together every night over dinner. From the assigned time of preparation, to the time of dishing up all the plates in the kitchen, pouring the drinks, setting the table, and then all the clean-up and dishwashing afterwards, it was a consistent and unchanging ritual we repeated every night.

I remember rather lively conversations as well, conversations which certainly included my father. And it was that experience and those conversations which defined what was best about our family life. We met together at the dinner table, and we talked together on a daily basis. Sadly, that experience is foreign for all too many families of our day, and even when families might manage to eat at the same time these days, it is the television that accounts for all the talking, not personal conversations.

I want you to think in terms of those interpersonal family conversations this afternoon, as we consider the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. There is so much going on there, not the least of which, of course, was the giving of the ten commandments.

Remember even the emphasis from last week, the thunder and the flashes of lightening. The sound of the trumpet. The fire and the smoke. All of those things showed forth the glory of God in his appearance.

But notice how God summarizes this event in our text this morning. Very simple words. Verse 22, "I have talked with you from heaven." That's how God himself describes the events at Mt. Sinai, "I have talked with you." It is that simple. Like a father sitting at a dinner table with his children.

And yet, it wasn't that simple. For God's presence was too great for any man to behold. No one could see God, and live. The people of Israel understood that.

Deut. 5:24 "Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man and man still live. 25 Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die."

But they didn't die at Mt. Sinai! They heard the voice God. God spoke to them. God talked to them. And they lived. Such is his mercy.

### I. THE MERCY OF GOD.

And I want you to think in those terms this afternoon. The mercy of God is shown in his willingness to talk to his covenant people. It was a voluntary condescension on God's part. It was an act of grace. It was a willingness to demean himself, as it were, to humble himself, in order to communicate personally with his people.

This God is not the god of Islam. Allah doesn't talk to his

people. It is not the god of animism, which pretends to recognize the presence of god in everything, everywhere. Such a god doesn't talk. He doesn't speak, not like my father spoke to us children around the dinner table every night. This is what makes God of the Bible the true God. He is personal. He retains the glory and the majesty befitting the creator of heaven and earth, and in his mercy upon us as his creatures, he talks to us.

God speaks. That's the God whom we worship. That's why we honor his word so greatly. He speaks.

**A. God talks with his covenant people.**

And yet, notice those words, he talks with us "from heaven." In other words,

**B. God speaks to his people with authority.**

He doesn't simply "share" something with us, as we use that rather common, but trite expression. It is not a conversation among equals. He doesn't babble. He doesn't resort to the informality nor the impersonal abruptness of modern communication forms like texting or even email. No instant messaging with all sorts of codes and abbreviations. No, God speaks to us from heaven, from the throne.

He gave his people ten words. Ten commandments. He spoke to them from heaven.

God still speaks from heaven. That's why the reading of his word is so crucial. Please let this be practical, and realistic. When you read the Bible, when you hear it read, God is speaking to you, from heaven. With authority. From his position of royal power. So please train yourself to listen. Discipline yourself to recognize his voice, and to honor what he says. Thankful his mercy shown in his willingness to talk to you in the first place.

v.22

He also talks to you when his word is being preached. Our Larger Catechism emphasizes the truth that "the spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, and effectual means" of his grace. God speaks to his people through the preaching of his word, which is why I take so seriously this task which God has called me to. When the word is read, when the word of God is preached to God's people, something happens that is analogous to Mt. Sinai. God speaks to us from heaven. That's what is going on right now, and that is what I would have you to be conscious of at this very minute.

Notice what God highlights first in his conversation with his people,

v.23

That is really the first commandment applied, with reference to whom we worship. And then, he brings up the subject of how we worship.

v.24

Beloved, that is God's priority for us, how we worship! What we do when we worship, and that principle is the same in the Old Covenant as well as the New. The outward forms change, of course, with the coming of Jesus, but the idea is unchanged. The priority and importance of our worship are unchanged. And God has the utmost concern for our worship, showing to us his jealousy that we worship him properly. What we see here is,

**II. THE JEALOUSY OF GOD WITH RESPECT TO OUR WORSHIP.**

Thus the repetition of this,

### **A. Warning against idolatry.**

Idols of silver and gold, gods of silver and gold. Objects of worship that are fashioned from the things of this world. So it is that we make gods out of our money, our worldly mammon. That might mean money in a bank account, or it might mean those things that money can buy. Your clothes. How important are they, to you? Just the right clothes. That which is popular and stylish, and labels you the same way. For many, that becomes a god. It could be your car, your home, your computer, your jewelry, your smartphone. It could be your food. It could even be a relationship, your husband or wife, a child, or a good friend.

So even in the NT we read, “Flee from idolatry.” And when John concludes his warm and personal first epistle, when he concludes his description of Jesus and finishes what he has to say about having eternal life through faith in Jesus, he writes this, the very last words of a very personal letter: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

And so at the conclusion of our study on the ten commandments, that exhortation comes to us. Little children, dear friends, beloved, “keep yourselves from idols.” With that encouragement comes,

### **B. A call to the simple sincerity of our worship.**

Again, I don’t really need to remind you that this is in the context of the Old Covenant. This is Mt. Sinai. But what is it that we find here at Mt. Sinai, with all these outward and external trappings of worship? A call to simplicity.

v.24 “An altar of earth you shall make for me.”

Not an altar of stone, but simply of earth. And if stone were to be used, no human tools were allowed.

v.25

A simple altar, using the materials of the earth unimproved by the hands of men. Simple sincerity. One commentator notes, “the altar was to set forth the nature of the simple earthly soil, unaltered by the hand of man.” This would also insure that the altars would be temporary, which is to say that no trace of them would remain after the people had left. For this was not their permanent home, and the worship of God was not tied to the geographical location of the altar, but rather to the blessing of God’s own presence among his people.

So the outward trappings of worship, even here in the Old Covenant were to be plain and simple, avoiding any temptation of the people to worship God as if he were represented by anything visual or external. Or with any sense of permanence upon the earth.

Calvin puts it this way: “God would have them built of earth, that they might fall down of themselves, and that no trace of them might remain after the departure of the people; but if stones were used, He forbade their being fitted together in a permanent structure, but would have them thrown rough and unpolished into a heap, lest their appearance should entice posterity to superstition.”

Matthew Henry comments, “That they might not be tempted to think of a graven image, they must not so much as hew into shape the stones that they made their altars of, but pile them up as they were, in the rough. This rule being prescribed before the establishment of the ceremonial law, which appointed altars much more costly, intimates that, after the period of that law, plainness should be accepted as the best ornament of the external services of religion, and that gospel-worship should not be performed with external pomp and gaiety. The beauty of holiness needs no paint, nor do those do any service to the spouse of Christ that dress her

in the attire of a harlot...: an altar of earth does best.”

“The beauty of holiness needs no paint.” What a marvelous way to express it. In worship, we behold the beauty of God, so we ought not attempt to profane that beauty by expressing it with outward and external attempts by men to portray it! Just an altar of earth.

We ought not to profane the worship of God by any temptation to find significance in the external trappings of men. Just an altar of earth. We ought not to think that the splendor of worship is connected to anything that we fashion with our hands. Rather, the splendor of worship is the beauty of God’s own presence. “Those who do any service to the spouse of Christ [need not] dress her in the attire of a harlot.” Just an altar of earth.

“Gospel-worship should not be performed with external pomp and gaiety.” Just an altar of earth. Simple sincerity. Along with,

### **C. A call to the submissive obedience of worship.**

In other words, the willingness to worship according to God’s own instructions and precepts. Not according to your own will or your own ideas and imaginations. Therefore,

v.25

If you use your own tool to shape or cut the rock, then you introduce what God has not ordered himself. If you use your own inventions in the worship of God, you profane that worship. You make it to be common, ordinary, and therefore not sacred at all.

Thus the principle is established, that we worship God only in the ways which he has prescribed. In the New Testament, that principle becomes defined by specific elements of worship, such as the reading and preaching of God’s word, prayer, singing,

observing the sacraments, collecting offerings, professions of faith, and ordinations.

This regulative principle of worship is well defined in, Deut. 12: 32 “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.”

The context of that is the warning not to worship the Lord your God in the way that the other nations worship and serve their gods. So don’t imitate the world when you worship. In the earthy descriptions of our test, use a simple, unadorned altar or earth. And if stones are used, don’t use human tools to cut the stones, making them decorative and ornate. Our decorations must never become entangled with our worship.

And that is a temptation for us, isn’t it? Whether it is a wall-covering or the color of a carpet, our external surroundings can become very important to us. And they shouldn’t be! Just a simple altar of earth. And if stone, no ornate decorations offered by the contribution of human skill.

Beloved, there is much to be said for simplicity when we worship, as it keeps us from the idolatry which so easily besets us. In that sense, very little has changed from the experiences of Mt. Sinai to today. Just think of all the trappings of human invention that churches add to the very essence of their worship. Just think of all the ways in which people today worship idols when it comes to their worship. The importance of buildings, clothing and vestments, the presence of ornate decorations, architectural designs, and examples of opulence and luxury, comfort and convenience.

And those things do become sacred, don’t they? Unchangeable. Those traditional surroundings can trap us in

ways we don't even recognize. So the Lord says to Moses, just use an altar of earth. And if you use any stone, be sure that you don't decorate it with your own tools and skill. That's what God says when he talks to his people from heaven. "Those who do any service to the spouse of Christ [need not] dress her in the attire of a harlot."

With one more emphasis regarding our worship,

#### **D. The purity of our worship.**

v.26

How shall I explain that? One commentator puts it this way, that this prohibition against steps is "a precaution taken for the sake of decency, in consequence of the loose, wide, flowing garments of the priests."

The point is that by ascending steps, the robes of a priest might not be modest or concealing. Calvin writes: "When God had prescribed modesty to the priests in their whole life, and in their private actions, no wonder that He should require especial care of decency and propriety in the performance of their sacred duties. He had indeed already desired that the priests should wear drawers or breeches when they went into the sanctuary; yet not content with this symbol of purity, He forbids them to ascend the altar by steps, lest haply the drawers themselves should be seen; since the dignity and sanctity of sacred things would thus be impaired. By all means, therefore, He would induce the Israelites to conduct themselves most purely and most chastely in the exercises of religion."

I could surely preach a whole sermon upon that singular subject. But let me move on to a description of,

### **III. THE BLESSINGS OF GOD.**

v.24b "In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you."

This language is important, especially this word "place." It is a reference to the place of worship, and in that place, when we gather for worship, look at what God says he does. "I cause my name to be remembered."

The blessing is that God will cause his name to be remembered at that prescribed place. More accurately, even, he will establish a memorial of his name--that's what our corporate worship is all about. He will make a glorious revelation of His divine nature. This blessing of the presence of God's name is a new covenant blessing as well, for that prescribed place for the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant worship becomes the place where we gather together in spirit and in truth for corporate worship.

When Paul writes to Timothy about how we are to conduct ourselves in the church, the household of God, he writes,

1 Tim. 2:8 "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling."

In every place, now, for Jesus says,

Mat. 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

So our blessing is the blessing of Jesus' presence. As the Lord said at Mt. Sinai, so he promises to us, "I will come to you and bless you." It is true for us then, that in every place where we meet,

#### **A. God will exalt himself among us.**

What a blessing that is! The place of our worship becomes holy ground--because God is among us! God exalts himself and the glory of his presence among us.

That is a good perspective for us to have with regard to our own worship, even today, because that same blessing is the fullest blessing we enjoy. Not the mood, not the number of people who might be here, not the outward or subjective feelings you might enjoy. But the ultimate blessing is reality, the objective reality, that now, in every place, God will cause his name to be remembered. God will come to us. God will meet with us. God will exalt himself among us.

The blessing is not merely that we glorify God. We surely do that, and surely we worship ultimately for what God himself will receive, what he will get out of it. But what we get out of it is this experience of a reciprocal blessing.

**B. God will exalt us by his presence.**

Again, don't miss those words, "I will bless you."

The very practical and pastoral point for us today is simple and clear, that the blessing for us is God himself. The blessing for us is that God will meet with us, that God will come to us. God is here. Jesus is here, when we are gathered as his body in his name. And because he is good and kind, merciful and compassionate, when he comes to us, we are exalted!

That's the blessing. Too often, I fear, we look for the blessing in all the wrong places. We look for it in what the preacher says, or what you were able to understand, what you got out of it. We look for the blessing in how good the sermon is, or how familiar the hymns were. We look for the blessing in how many other people are here. But beloved, that's not where the blessing is to

be found, not the greatest blessing of them all.

This requires something of a shift, I believe, for many Christians. A shift in your thinking, and certainly a shift in your thinking about worship. It is one of the great benefits of studying these chapters in Exodus, to learn what our worship is all about. This is the blessing, that God will exalt himself among us, and that God will exalt us by his presence.

That blessing perhaps most clear when we finish our worship service, with the blessing of the benediction. The benediction is a statement of this blessing, a pronouncement of it. It is not a prayer, and I encourage to lift your eyes and your hearts, even your hands if you wish to do so, to hear and to receive that blessing. You know the words. Let them be to you the fullest expression of this glorious blessing we enjoy together as God's worshiping people.

Num. 6:24 "The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Let me read the very next verse in Numbers 6 to complete this explanation and exposition of God's word this morning,

Num. 6:27 "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."