

## **Embracing the Lord**

**by Scott Grant**

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### **Limited photos**

My study is adorned with a few beautiful photos from throughout the world: a small village in Italy, a trout stream in Idaho, a pastoral scene in Bulgaria. Wistfully, I gaze at them sometimes. But no matter how intently I look, and even dream of being in one of those places, those photos can never take me outside my study. The photos are good in that they reveal something about some of my favorite places, but they are limited; they can't take me to those places. The law of God is like that. Biblical law is good, because it reveals God. As any communication reveals something about the communicator, God's law reveals something about God. As any law reveals something of the character of the person or group drafting the law, God's law reveals something about his character - his absolute holiness. So God's law, as the Apostle Paul says, is "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12), and it is "spiritual" (Romans 7:14), meaning that it came from the Holy Spirit, whose chief ministry is to reveal God. But the law, like a photograph, is limited: It can't take us to God.

This is a fact - a truth to which many followers of Jesus Christ would wholeheartedly subscribe. But at a very deep level, most of us are resistant to this truth. We keep clinging to the incorrect belief that figuring out and following the right rules will somehow get us in good with God. Thus, we misuse the law, just as we would misuse a photograph if we expected it to be a 747 that could take us to Italy.

The law is good; it shows us who God is. But it can only take us so far. Is there something that can take us all the way to God? There is something. More accurately, there is someone. Jesus takes us to God. The law is good; Jesus is better. Although the law reveals God, Jesus takes us to God.

In Exodus 19, Moses does some good things. Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, came to be associated with the law (John 1:17). Moses is good; Jesus is better. Jesus makes us ready for the Lord and present with the Lord, where we are able to be intimate with the Lord.

### **Ready for the Lord (19:7-15)**

Moses relays to the elders the Lord's phenomenal proposal of relationship, which was revealed to Moses in 19:4-6. If the people enter into the relationship, their status will be the Lord's treasured possession, and their vocation will be that of holy priests, living for the Lord and dispensing his blessing to the entire world. The people accept the Lord's proposal. After seeing all that the Lord had done for them, plucking them out of Egypt and carrying them to himself, they'd have to be crazy not to.

The Lord promises Moses that he will establish Moses before the people as the mediator of this covenant relationship. The Lord says he will appear in a thick cloud, which symbolizes his presence, and that the people will hear him when he speaks with Moses, thereby establishing Moses' credibility before the people.

A similar scene in the New Testament establishes Christ's credibility as the mediator of the New Covenant (Mark 9:2-8). Moses took the people to Mount Sinai; Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountain. At this mountain, Moses appeared, and conversed with Jesus. Peter treated Moses and Jesus as equals. But they were not equals. Mark 9:8: "Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.' "As the Lord spoke out of the cloud to establish Moses' credibility, the Lord spoke out of a cloud to establish Jesus' credibility. But that which is established for Jesus is far greater than that which was established for Moses. Moses was there on the Mount of Transfiguration, being treated by Peter as Jesus' equal, but God responded to set things straight. Jesus is God's beloved Son.

The people are instructed to do two things before meeting the Lord: 1) Be ready. 2) Be consecrated. What do these things mean?

Twice the people are told to "be ready." In verse 15, the command is followed by another command to "not go near a woman." This is a euphemism for sexual relations. Of course, there is nothing wrong with sexual relations in the context of marriage. But a far more important relationship is about to be consummated - the people's relationship with the Lord. Paul is in favor of periodic abstinence for the sake of pursuing one's relationship with the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:5). Being ready for the Lord, then, is equated with recognizing that nothing is more important than relationship with him, even the most intimate of human relationships.

This is nothing less than repentance. John the Baptist spoke of "preparing" the way of the Lord and making his way "ready" (Mark 1:2-3). His message was one of repentance (Mark 1:4). Repentance means to change one's mind. In order to enter into a relationship with God, repentance, or a change of mind, is necessary. One has to go from being opposed to such a relationship to being in favor of it. So when we see the words "be ready" in Exodus 19, we can understand them as a call for us to change our minds and enter into a relationship with God. In this sense, many of us have already repented: We have seen relationship with God as a good thing, not a bad thing.

But wanting to enter into relationship is not enough. I'm sure we can all recount stories of relationships that we wanted but couldn't make happen because the other party was resistant. The Lord, of course, is not resistant to relationship. He offers relationship to all, but he accepts only those who are holy.

The verb "consecrate" is related to the noun "holiness." In that the people are consecrated, they are made holy. Holy means to be set apart for some special use. They are to be set apart for this meeting with the Lord.

As the command to not touch a woman comes on the heels of the command to be ready, so the command to wash garments comes on the heels of the command to be consecrated. Being consecrated, or set apart, involves being washed. The concept of being washed is equated with being cleansed from sin. So being holy, or being set apart, means being cleansed from sin. Only people cleansed from sin are able to meet God.

How are we made holy? How are we cleansed from sin? First Corinthians 6:11: "And such were some of you; but you were *washed*, but you were *sanctified*, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." The verb "sanctify," like "consecrate," is related to noun "holiness." It is only the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from sin and makes us holy, able to enter into relationship with God.

So when we get "ready," we repent - we desire to enter into relationship with God. When we are made holy by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are able to enter into relationship with God.

This section warns against flippancy. God can only be approached by holy people. But it also encourages confidence, for Jesus has made us holy; he has qualified us to meet God. And qualified we are - clean, spotless, blameless. Holy.

This is something obedience to the law decidedly cannot do. It cannot make us acceptable to God. All our supposed "holiness" does not make us acceptable to God. Only Jesus Christ, and our belief in him, makes us acceptable. That means we can stop trying so hard. That means we can stop whipping ourselves into a holy frenzy. That means we can stop condemning ourselves when we deem ourselves "unacceptable." That means, no matter how great the sin, we can stop feeling guilty for the sin, because Jesus Christ has borne our guilt.

I was told a story not long ago about a pilot who was trying to land a damaged plane. A million things were going through his head, but the air traffic controller pierced through the confusion with one simple sentence: "The runway is clear." We all have damaged planes, so to speak. We've damaged ourselves through sin. Because of it, a million things are running through our heads. We panic, and we frantically try to fix ourselves to qualify ourselves for God. But the cross of Jesus Christ speaks to us in one simple sentence: "The runway is clear." Because of Jesus, we are acceptable to God. Don't fix the plane; just land the plane. Believe in Jesus; enter into the presence of the Lord.

## **Present with the Lord (19:16-20)**

The Lord's appearance at Mount Sinai is accompanied by physically awesome phenomena: thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, fire, smoke, an earthquake. These phenomena convey the Lord's holiness. The Lord shows up to meet his people, but this is not like shaking hands with a friend. The people recognize this and tremble.

Despite the "differentness" of the Lord, he wants to meet with these people. He wants to enter into relationship with them. Moses leads them out for this awesome encounter with the living God. Moses, the leader of the people, speaks, and the Lord answers.

This meeting between the Lord and the people of Israel represents a major advance in God's plan to restore humanity to fellowship with him. Here, man speaks, and God answers. Since the fall it was rare for God to meet with man. Here he meets with an entire nation. In that light, this is an amazing encounter.

As amazing as it is, it is also a limited encounter. The people could only approach the foot of the mountain, the Lord descended just to the top of the mountain and Moses acted as go-between. The law is good; Jesus is better. Jesus blows the doors off the limitations of the law. Let's see how.

To meet the people, the Lord had to descend to earth, their land. It would be far better if the people could ascend to the Lord, to his land. Can we do such a thing? We already have done it!

As God descended to Mount Sinai to meet humanity, Jesus Christ descended from heaven to meet humanity (John 1:14, Philippians 2:5-8). God touched down at Mount Sinai, and Moses could only take the people to the foot of the mountain. How far has Jesus taken us? Notice in this passage that there are four references to "the third day" (19:11, 15, 16). The people meet the Lord on the third day. In verse 16, the Lord appears on the "morning" of the third day. When did Jesus rise from the dead? On the morning of the third day. The resurrection marked the beginning of Jesus' ascension, not to the foot of the mountain, not even to the top of the mountain but all the way to heaven (Ephesians 1:20)! Jesus, then, is our man in heaven. But it gets even better than that. He's not only our man in heaven, he took us with him! God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Jesus has taken us to God's land. In a way that we cannot fully understand or appreciate, we are in heaven right now, in God's land. But one thing we can understand, and this is the important thing to understand: Right now we are in the presence of the Lord, and Jesus made that possible.

Just as obedience to the law cannot prepare us for relationship to God, it cannot take us to the presence of God. It shows us who God is. Used rightly, it can show us that knowing and worshiping God is good. It gets us to the foot of the mountain, so to speak, but not to the heights, not the very presence of the Lord. Jesus takes us all the way. He breaks through, taking us with him. In fact, he already has taken us all the way. We already are in the presence of the Lord, whether we know it or not.

Several years ago I wanted to travel from Stuttgart, Germany, to Heidelberg. When I arrived at the Stuttgart train station, I was overwhelmed by the number of tracks, and I couldn't find my way to the right train. Somewhat flustered, I was able to communicate to a passer-by that I needed help finding the train to Heidelberg. He was able to take me to the right train. But that's all he was able to do. He was not able to get me out of Stuttgart. The engineer took me to Heidelberg. Like my friend in the train station, the law is able to take us to a certain place but no further. Like the engineer, Jesus takes us to the presence of the Lord.

So Jesus Christ has taken us into the very presence of the Lord. What do we do there? We embrace him.

## **Intimate with the Lord (19:21-25)**

The limitations of the Old Covenant and the law are clear in this section. The people can get only so close to the Lord. In fact, there are severe consequences if they get too close. If they get too close, they will perish.

There are also severe consequences for any approach that attempts to relate to God on the basis of the law. If

someone tries to relate to God on the basis of the law, however he may define the law, he will perish - he will not experience eternity with the Lord. No amount of good living can qualify a person for heaven; only faith in Christ can do so.

Under the Old Covenant, there is a certain distance from the Lord. The people can't draw near; they can't "gaze" upon the Lord. That's because this covenant is preparatory: It anticipates the mediator who can take us to a better place.

Exodus 19 presents a fearsome picture of the Lord. It reminds us that not just anyone can saunter into the presence of the Lord. It may cause us to tremble in fear, as it did the Israelites. Only holy people can appear before the Lord. But of course, those who believe in Jesus Christ are holy, for he has made them so.

What, then, does the New Testament say about drawing near to the Lord? Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Unlike the Israelites, we are not only encouraged to draw near but to draw near with confidence. There is no need to tremble, as the Israelites did. In fact, we can stand in the presence of the Lord with "great joy" (Jude 24).

What does the New Testament say about gazing upon the Lord? Second Corinthians 3:18: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." The Greek word translated "beholding as in a mirror" contains the meaning of looking at something as if one were looking in a mirror. In other words, it means to contemplate or scrutinize something. Paul encourages us, then, to gaze upon the glory of the Lord. The Israelites couldn't do this; we can. This of course does not mean that we can physically look upon the Lord but that we can spiritually appreciate who he is in a way that the Israelites couldn't.

What is drawing near and gazing all about? It is about relationship. It is about experiencing the Lord's love, and loving him in return. It is about appreciating his glory, all of who he is. It's about embracing him, because we know that nothing keeps us from embracing him anymore.

It's about seeing him, appreciating him and embracing him as the Apostle John did. The story of the transfiguration appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke. N.T. Wright writes of John's omission: "John, by contrast takes us up the mountain, and says quietly: 'Look - from here, on a clear day, you can see forever.' We beheld his glory, glory as of the Father's only Son. John does not describe the transfiguration, as the other gospels do; in a sense, John's whole story is about the transfiguration. He invites us to be still and know; to look again into the human face of Jesus of Nazareth, until the awesome knowledge comes over us, wave upon terrifying wave, that we are looking into the human face of the living God."

Obedience to the law does not help us embrace God. In fact, in our warped sense of things, we intend it to have exactly the opposite effect. We are not obedient because we love God; we are obedient because we are afraid to love God. We're afraid we'll get burned. The Pharisees loved obedience, but they didn't love God. Like the Pharisees, we love obedience for what it can do for us - make us feel that we are good people. And if we're good people, we reason that we don't need God. So in a warped way, we use obedience to the law to keep us distant from God. And we want to keep our distance because we're not sure whether we trust him.

Jesus, though, has shown us emphatically that God is good. He has taken us to the presence of God and shown us that God is waiting with open arms, and he has given us every nudge and push we need to rush into the arms of our loving Father.

In the movie "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey's friends, Ernie and Burt, escort him to a house on his wedding night. Waiting inside is his new bride, Mary, who has prepared a sumptuous feast. Stunned, George doesn't know quite what to do. But Ernie gives him a gentle nudge in the right direction, into the arms of his wife. Mary embraces him and whispers, "Welcome home, George." Like George's friend, Jesus not only has taken us to our heavenly home, he nudges us in the right direction, encouraging us to embrace the Father, who whispers in our ears, "Welcome home."

## Enter in

Jesus has prepared us for relationship with God and taken us to the presence of God, where we are free to embrace to Lord in an intimate, worshipful relationship. If we are not experiencing this, what might be the reason? Deep within us is the Exodus 19 image of God: fearsome, earth-shaking. Deep down, we know that God cannot tolerate even a speck of sin. This is an accurate picture. God cannot tolerate a speck of sin, and we know we have way more than a speck; our bodies are wracked with sin. So like the Israelites of old, we tremble before God, afraid to draw near, fearing that we'll be blown off the mountain. We harbor deeply held convictions that we're not good enough and that if we have any hope of relationship with God, we'd better get better.

Therefore, we misuse the law, because we are prideful people who want to find something to boast about. We misuse the law in the hopes that it can provide us the means by which we can feel some sense of accomplishment, some sense of righteousness. But the law is limited. The law can't prepare us for relationship with God; only Jesus can. The law can't take us to the presence of God; only Jesus can. The law can't enable us to enjoy intimacy with God; only Jesus can.

Although the law reveals God, only Jesus takes us to God. So let us abandon the tired, frustrating, paralyzing approach that sets us spinning on an exhausting and idolatrous self-improvement project. Instead, let us believe that Jesus has done everything that needs to be done. Let us boldly approach the throne of grace. And let us embrace our King.

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