

## **Come up to the Lord**

by Scott Grant

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### **Good intentions**

If someone asks you to come close to him, would you do it? It all depends upon your knowledge of the person and your interpretation of the reason for his request, doesn't it? If he were a complete stranger, you probably wouldn't get very close, and you might even move in the opposite direction. If he were someone you were acquainted with, you'd probably still be hesitant. Even if someone who you are intimate with made the request, you might be somewhat reticent unless you were somehow convinced of his good intentions. After all, the closer you get to someone, the more damage he can do. He can't stab you from 10 feet away, but he can if you're right next to him.

In Exodus 24, the Lord says to Moses, "Come up to me." If you were Moses, would you do it? It all depends on whether you believed that the Lord's intentions were good. Moses believed that the Lord's intentions were good, not evil, so he marched up the mountain. The Lord does not intend to destroy us but to relate with us.

In Exodus 20:22-23:33, the stipulations of the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel are spelled out. Exodus 24 records the consummation of this relationship. Two groups and one individual are involved: The people, the leaders and Moses.

### **The players (24:1-2)**

The Lord, speaking to Moses, instructs Moses, Aaron, Nadir, Abihu and the 70 elders to come up the mountain to him. Aaron, Nadab and Abihu are all priests. The 70 elders represent the people. Seventy is the number that stands for the entire nation (Genesis 46:27; Exodus 1:5, 15:27). All of these are told to worship "at a distance," but Moses alone is told to proceed further up the mountain and "come near." The people are not to "come up." The people remain somewhat distant from the Lord, the leaders get closer to the Lord and Moses draws near to the Lord:

**God**

**Moses**

**Leaders**

**People**

The text will recount each individual and group's encounter with the Lord. The specter of death looms in each encounter. God is holy; man is not. The Hebrews had a pretty good handle on this disparity. They wondered, "How can any human stand in the presence of God?" The prospect of death, they believed, loomed for someone who got too close to God. So drawing near to God was not necessarily seen happily. They wondered, "How close can someone get to God without dying?" They are about to find out. In Exodus 24:3-8, the people encounter the Lord. In 24:9-11, the leaders encounter the Lord. In 24:12-18, Moses encounters the Lord. In each case, we want to observe two things: 1) How close can each person/group get to the Lord? 2) The specter of death in each encounter.

## **Distant from the Lord (24:3-8)**

The people relate to the Lord, but the relationship is somewhat distant. Any relationship is defined by communication that takes place between the two parties. In this section, "words" come from the Lord (24:3, 4, 8). The people answer God's words (24:3, 7). But the communication is not direct. The Lord does not speak directly to the people; he speaks to Moses. Moses "recounts," "writes down" and "reads" God's words to the people (24:3, 4, 7). When the people answer the Lord, they don't speak to him directly but to Moses. Moses, the mediator of the covenant, is something of a middleman.

Even where this somewhat distant relationship is concerned, death is required. God is holy; man is not. God cannot tolerate sin. One cannot enter into relationship with the Lord without dying, unless, of course, he is without sin. If he has sin and draws near to God, he dies. That's another way of saying that it is simply impossible to have a relationship with God. We all have sin; if any of us draws near to God, we'll die; and how can a dead person have a relationship? He can't.

Well, the Lord made a way for Israel. Death is required, but the people don't die. Animals die. The people offer up animals as offerings to the Lord. Their death substitutes for the death of the people. The Lord accepts the death of the animals; therefore, the people can enter into relationship with the Lord.

Moses builds an altar to the Lord and 12 pillars for Israel, which constitutes 12 tribes. He sprinkles both the altar and the pillars with blood. Both are covered with blood. In order for the nation to enter into relationship with God, death must take place. Nothing now exists between the people and the Lord but blood, symbolizing that death has taken place. Death has happened; relationship can happen. So Moses says of the sprinkled blood, "Behold, the blood of the covenant ... "

But still, it's somewhat distant relationship. The people cannot go up the mountain, and they cannot come near to the Lord. Why? There is this sense that the blood of bulls and goats just doesn't quite cut it. It's more than a sense, actually. It's a fact: "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

Although the people must stay below, the leaders are called to come closer to the Lord.

## **Closer to the Lord (24:9-11)**

The leaders get closer to the Lord. This is a remarkable encounter, really. They see God. They don't see God himself, for God is spirit and no one can see him (John 1:18). What the people see is a vision of God, not God himself. Just as a painting represents the thoughts of the artist but is not, in fact, the thoughts themselves, this vision of God represents God but is not God himself.

The description of this vision focuses solely on what is under God's feet. They see what looks like "a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself." What's underneath God's feet is stunning. It's as if they are so taken in by the awesomeness of what's below God that they can't even work their way up to look at God himself. Even his footstool is more beautiful than anything they've ever seen! This God is holy.

Where is the specter of death in this encounter? It is in verse 11: "Yet he did not stretch out his hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel." The description of stretching out one's hand against someone was a euphemism for killing someone (Genesis 22:12). The implication of the text, then, is that the people would expect to be killed by the Lord. When people "see" God, they expect to die. Isaiah, after seeing a vision of the Lord, expresses this sentiment: "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). Yet the people don't die.

This is surprising enough. But what happens next is astounding. The people not only see God, they eat and drink. They sit down for a meal. This is part of the covenant consummation (Genesis 26:30), so they are not only sharing a meal with each other; they are sharing a meal with God. This is high fellowship. Not only does the Lord spare their lives as they move toward him and see him, they sit down to supper with him. It's

becoming clear that the Lord, holy though he be, is not out to destroy; he's out to relate.

The Lord, then, asks Moses to come up to the next level.

### **Near to the Lord (24:12-18)**

Earlier when the Lord addressed Moses, he said, "Come up to the Lord" (24:1). Now he says, "Come up to me." The address is more intimate. This is a personal, intimate invitation. The Lord asks him to come up to the mountain and "remain there." This is more than a quick hello and goodbye.

The Lord intends to give Moses stone tablets upon which he has written the law, which is intended to instruct the people. The tablets contain what are commonly called the 10 commandments but what the scriptures refer to as the 10 words. Although they take the form of commandments, they first and foremost are God's "words" to his people -- his speech to them. These words are "for their instruction." These 10 words, then, represent the Lord's best hopes for his people. Written on these two stone tablets is God's heart for his people. The Lord, then, is telling Moses, "Come up to me, and I will show you my heart."

Whereas Moses "wrote" down the Lord's words for the people (24:4), who received God's words indirectly, Moses will directly receive the words that the Lord has "written." The relationship between the Lord and Moses is more direct, more intimate.

If death would be the expected result of the previous encounter with the Lord, wouldn't a similar fate be expected from this more intimate encounter? If you were Moses, what would you do? Moses takes Joshua with him and tells the elders, "Wait here for us until we return to you." Moses goes. Not only does he go, he expresses confidence that he will return. He expects to encounter the Lord, intimately and extensively, and yet he doesn't expect to die.

Moses, who shoulders immense responsibilities for leading the people, leaves those responsibilities behind. He leaves Aaron and Hur to take over for him. Here's a man, with more responsibilities than any of us, who knows that his first priority is meeting with the Lord. If Moses can find time for the Lord, we can find time for the Lord. Our responsibilities are probably not nearly so pressing as leading the most important nation in history.

As Moses ascends the mountain, the presence of the Lord is described as extensive and lasting. The cloud "covered" the mountain; it covered it for "six days"; and the glory of the Lord "rested" on Mount Sinai. The Lord is there; he is there strongly; and he is there lastingly.

On the seventh day, the Lord calls Moses to come closer. The seventh day is the holy day, the sabbath, which is set apart for worship. It is appropriate, therefore, that Moses approach the Lord on the seventh day. So on the seventh day, the Lord calls to Moses from the middle of the cloud, from the center of his glory, from the center of his being.

Before the text describes Moses' response, it describes the scene from the perspective of the "sons of Israel," the people on the bottom of the mountain. They are too far away to see Moses, but they see this manifestation of the glory of the Lord, and it looks to them "like a consuming fire." This is a narrator of immense skill. He relates the perspective of the people, and therefore shows what the people's reaction would have been had they been observing Moses. If they were there, with the Lord calling to Moses from the middle of what looked like a "consuming fire," what would they have told Moses to do? Something along the lines of, "Get outta there!" As Moses moved toward the middle of the cloud, what would their response have been? Something like, "You fool!" Here, then, is the specter of death in Moses' encounter with the Lord. A consuming fire does one thing: It consumes. If it consumes a person, that means death.

Moses, then, enters the midst of the cloud. We can only imagine what this encounter was like -- entering into the very center of God's being. And this lasted 40 days and 40 nights! The number 40 is often used as a symbol of testing. The test is not for Moses, but for the people, so that they can see for themselves whether they trust the Lord while Moses is away. But that's another story.

Despite the specter of death, when the Lord says "Come up to me," Moses goes. He left all his responsibilities behind. When the Lord beckoned to him from the center of himself, Moses entered. What enabled Moses to obey? What enabled him to move through the fear of death? Simply, he trusted the Lord. He believed the Lord's intentions were good. He believed the Lord wanted to share his heart with him, just as he said. Whether we come up to the Lord and confidently enter into his being depends on whether we understand his intentions to be good.

Eugene Peterson was a boy growing up in Montana when he had an encounter with a Norwegian farmer named Leonard Storm: "When I was 5 years old I would walk across the meadow between our back yard and his fenced fields. I would stand at the barbed wire strand and watch the farmer plow the field with his enormous tractor. The thing I wished for most in those days was to get a ride on that John Deere tractor. One summer day I was standing at the fence (I would never have dared to climb through it) watching Brother Storm, for that was the farmer's name, plow the field. He was probably 100 yards away when he spotted me. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat and made strong waving motions to me with his arm. I had never seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry; he was large and ominous in his big overalls and straw hat. He was yelling at me, but the wind was blowing against him, and I could hear nothing. I knew that I was probably where I shouldn't be. Five-year-old boys often are. I turned and left. Sadly, I hadn't felt I was doing anything wrong -- I was only watching from what I thought was a safe distance and wishing that someday, somehow, I could get to ride that tractor. I went home feeling rejected, rebuked."

Eugene Peterson questioned the farmer's intentions. Did those huge gestures and booming voice mean that he wanted him to come ride the tractor, or did it mean that he was angry with him? The frightened little boy ran away. Similarly, we question God's gestures, so to speak, as he calls to us in the scriptures. Is he calling because he wants to relate, or is he calling because he's angry and he wants to destroy?

### **How close can we get?**

So, who do you want to be like? Do you want to be like the people, distant from the Lord; the leaders, closer to the Lord; or Moses, close to the Lord? If we want to be close to the Lord on one level, how do we deal with the fear that we might get destroyed in the process? After all, God is holy, and man is not. And besides all that, how do we deal with the fear that when God calls us to come to him, his intentions may not be good? And if all those questions are answered, this one remains: Is it even possible to get close to the Lord? After all, only Moses could draw near.

Where do we find the answers to these questions? We find them all at the same place. The Place of the Skull. Golgotha. Calvary. We find them hanging on a cross. We find them in the blood that poured out from a bruised and broken body. We find them in the words, "It is finished." The answer is yes, you are holy before the Lord. Because of Jesus. The answer is yes, God's intentions are good, for if he gave up his Son so that we could be with him, how could they be anything other than good? Because of Jesus. The answer is yes, it's possible to draw near to God. Because of Jesus. The answer to all these questions is yes, if you believe that Jesus Christ shed his blood for you so that you could know God.

If any doubts remain, consider how the New Testament treats the themes in Exodus 24:

-- If the blood of bulls and goats "sprinkled" on the people couldn't take away sins, so that they didn't have confidence to "come near" to God without dying, how about the blood of God's own Son? Hebrews 10:22: " ... let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience ... "

-- Moses, upon sprinkling the blood of animals on the altar and the pillars, proclaimed, "Behold, the blood of the covenant ... " Jesus, taking a cup of wine on the last night he was with his disciples, told them, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."

-- The leaders of Israel saw a vision of God. We behold "the glory of the Lord" (2

Corinthians 3:18).

-- The leaders ate a meal in the presence of the Lord. Do we see Jesus sharing meals with anyone in the New Testament? All over the place! Most poignantly, we see him sharing a meal with his disciples on his last night. We, too, share a meal with God when we partake of "the Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11:20), and we look forward to "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

-- The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me." Jesus says, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

-- The Lord showed Moses his heart as he wrote the 10 words onto stone tablets. The Lord has written his words "not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3). Thus, we see God's heart in a way that not even Moses could, as the Spirit continually shows us who God is.

So we can eat with the Lord. We can come near to the Lord. We can listen to the Lord. All of us. Before, there was a certain hierarchy. Jesus Christ has blown that hierarchy away. Consider Luke 15:1-2: "Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near to listen to him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" Here we see Exodus 24 themes: coming near to the Lord; absorbing his word as Moses did; eating in the presence of the Lord. Who are the people doing these things? Tax-gatherers and sinners. The lowest of the low. The dregs of society. Before, you had to be a priest or an elder to take one step up the mountain, and even then you thought you might not make it back alive. The common people couldn't come up. When Jesus comes on the scene, he reaches even below the common people to the lowest of the low and catapults them into his presence:

**God**

**Moses**

**Leaders**

**People**

**Sinners**

"Come up to me," the Lord said to Moses. He intends not to destroy but to relate. "Come to me," Jesus says to us.

Eugene Peterson's story doesn't end the day that he ran away in fear from Leonard Storm: "The Sunday after my disappointment at the edge of his field, Brother Storm called me over after worship and said, 'Little Pete' (he always called me 'Little Pete' -- I hated that), 'Little Pete, why didn't you come out in the field Thursday and ride the tractor with me?' I told him that I didn't know I could have, that I thought he was chasing me away. He said, 'I called you to come. I waved for you to come. Why did you leave?' I said that I didn't know that was what he was doing. ...

"A few days after my disappointment at the edge of his field and his reprimand in church, I was back at the fence, watching, hoping I might get a second chance. The giant Norwegian saw me, stopped the tractor and did it again, made that sweeping motion of invitation. I was through the barbed wire in a flash, running across the furrowed field and then up on the big green John Deere. He let me stand in front of him, holding the steering wheel, pulling the plow down that long stretch of field, my smallness now absorbed into his largeness."

When the Lord beckons, it may look big and scary; it may look like he wants to inflict damage. It may look like his holiness is going to destroy our sinfulness. But the blood of his Son removes all doubt, because it removes all sinfulness and it proves beyond question that God intends to relate, not destroy. So, jump up onto

the tractor! Come up to the Lord.

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