

When God provides a covenant meal

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[0 : 00] I want to begin by talking about a short story that I read this week. For the first, I meant to read it for ages, but I don't know if you've come across Karen Blixen, who wrote *Out of Africa*.

She wrote a short story called *Babette's Feast*, which then got turned into a movie in the 80s. It's the story of two elderly sisters in Norway living in a fjord, part of a very strict and severe Lutheran church. As the short story progresses, you recognize there's little joy and little grace within this religious community. But the story focuses on these two elderly sisters who at one point in their life take in a refugee from Paris, Babette of the title. Twelve years, she lives and she serves within the house, and she asks her first favor after 12 years.

She knows that it's the 100th anniversary of the founding of the church. The church wants to have some kind of celebration, and she says, this is what I want to do. I want to prepare the meal for the church anniversary. And what happens? It becomes this wonderful celebration of grace.

Nobody knew at the time, but Babette was a famous Parisian chef. She has come into a fortune, and she spends this fortune preparing this lavish meal. And during the course of the meal, it's wonderful as she tells the story, old fights that had brewed for years are forgotten. There's reconciliation. Happy memories are shared, and a community comes to life. And it's a wonderful little story with a wonderful truth, that meals, meals that we share can become moments of grace, that a table is spread and friendship is shared. And that takes us to the heart and the goal of this covenant meal that we've read about in Exodus 24, that the God of grace spreads this table, invites the leaders of the people, invites the people into fellowship. It's the story that we've been seeing all along, that God has saved His people by grace, and He's saving them for personal relationship. And so here we are at the climax of this covenant ceremony that runs all the way from chapters 19 to 24. In chapter 19, they're reminded of the call of grace. In chapters 20 and then 21 to 23, they're called to obedience through faith, but all the while remembering that there are people who are saved by grace.

And now at the climax of the covenant, as it's confirmed, the people's representatives, and especially Moses, go up the mountain to meet with God, and they know His generous grace in a special way.

[3 : 09] This chapter connects us with the Lord's Supper. That's why we're sharing it this evening. But it actually connects us as well with the goal of all of our lives. You and I are made to know and to enjoy God, to share fellowship with God, to enter into life with the living God. And this chapter is giving us just a glimpse of what that life looks like. That by grace, God's people are set apart to be holy. By grace, God's people are invited into fellowship. And by God's grace, we get to experience God's glory. So let's get to our text, that God's people are, first of all, set apart to be holy. It's here in the first eight verses. Notice in the first couple of verses, God's gracious invitation come up to the Lord is the message that comes from God to the leaders of the people. Why did God save His people? Why do they have this unique privilege? What is their unique privilege? It's that they would be a people who would know their God. And so Moses and the leaders are invited up. And then in verses three and four, we discover that Moses comes and reads the

Lord's words, and the people respond with faith. As they hear the Ten Commandments, as they hear how those commandments are supposed to be worked out in society, they say, we will obey. That's their heart's desire. It's the response of faith. Of course, they won't do it perfectly. They can't do it perfectly, and neither do or can we. But wonderfully, God is merciful. And even within this chapter, we see that sacrifices are provided that will cover over sin and allow fellowship to be restored. But what I want us to think about is the two visual and symbolic parts of this covenant ceremony. The first you'll find in verse four, it's the altar and the stones. Moses, halfway through verse four, 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. Now, we know within the UK there are big stone pillars that attract much interest from visitors and archaeologists alike. You can go far down south, and you can go to Stonehenge. You can go far north and west, and you can go to Kalanish. And people speculate and wonder, why are these stones here? What's with the pattern? What's with the shape? What's the significance? Well, we don't need to wonder what the significance is of this set of stones, because we're told that it represents God and His people. Here is God in His grace willing to dwell among His people.

And if you can remember back to chapter 19, this has significance. It goes back to that principle, be holy because I am holy. The holy God will dwell in the camp, and therefore they have this imperative, this missionary imperative to be holy, to reflect God's glory. So, there's the altar and the stones, and then there's the blood as part of this covenant ceremony. And there's two aspects to how this blood is used. First, we're told in verse six that the blood of the sacrifice, half of it, is splashed against the altar. So, a sacrifice has been made, sacrifice of a substitute, and the blood is sprinkled on the altar as a sign of cleansing, that there is mercy from God, that He accepts the sacrifice, that this substitute turns away the judgment of God, that there is washing from sin, that there is required for the people of God to live in relationship with Him. And then half of the blood, we discover, is also sprinkled on the people.

And this is where things take a strange turn. 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. What is going on here as blood is being thrown on the people? Well, it's interesting to notice there's only two other places in the Old Testament where blood is applied directly.

First, you'll find in Exodus 29 that when the high priest and his sons are established, blood is applied directly there onto their toes, their thumbs, their ears, and their clothes. So, there's one instance, Exodus 29, and the other where blood is to be applied directly is when lepers are cleansed. You find that in Leviticus 8. And the point with both of these is that status is changed.

[8 : 45] The priest in that moment, his status was changed from being sort of common to being holy, set apart to serve God. The leper's status was changed from being unclean to being regarded as clean.

So, when the blood is being applied to the people of God, what's it saying to them? You have been saved. You have been washed clean. Now you are set apart as God's holy people.

To be that kingdom of priests, to be that holy nation. The holy God by His grace is going to dwell with His people. Therefore, His people must be holy, living to reflect God's character and God's values within the community and to a watching world.

To think back to Babette's feast, it captures the sense that as a church community is graced, in that case by a lavish meal, being graced, they begin to practice grace again. As the holy God, by sheer grace calls us to Himself, cleanses us through the blood of Jesus, consecrates us, sets us apart, says, you are mine, that should cause grace to overflow from us, and leading us to pursue holiness, to become more like Jesus. Especially as we recognize that the symbols here, the altar and the stones and the blood, these symbols are fulfilled with the coming of the Lord Jesus. Think about the life of Israel. Here, there's the altar in the middle, and there's these stones all around. Then think about the arrangement for their camp. There was God's tent, and their tents were all around. What was that saying to them? Every day, God is with us.

What a wonderful privilege. But what a greater privilege we have, because we have Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, who came to dwell among us, and now dwells in our hearts through faith.

[11 : 14] And we have the blood, don't we? We have the blood of the new covenant. Because this is how Jesus spoke at the Lord's Supper. As He looked ahead to the cross, He understood the purpose of His going.

He would be the perfect sacrifice. He would be the one substitute for sinners whose blood cleanses. That when our faith is in Jesus and His finished work, our status is changed. We are made holy by the blood of Jesus. So, the message of our covenant meal is one that speaks to us of the holy obedience of Jesus, all the way to the cross to die in our place, to fulfill God's plan of salvation. And as we let that sink into our hearts, then that will fuel our mission to live holy lives, and to seek to grace others as we have been graced ourselves.

That's the idea of being set apart to be holy. Now, we come to the meal itself, and this invitation into fellowship is there in verses 9 to 11. But just before we go there, it's worth pausing to ask, where is all this taking place? And the answer, it's up a mountain.

It's Mount Sinai. And these little verses are remarkable because what we have are Moses and the elders of the people of God, and they're sharing a meal on the mountain, but they're in the presence of God Himself. It says they see God, but instead of destruction, there is invitation to feast. Just by way of clarity, when it says there in verse 10, they saw the God of Israel. Now, we know from the Bible that God is a spirit. He is invisible, but we've already seen in Exodus that God has appeared in the burning bush, and He's appeared in the pillar of fire and cloud. So, He is a God who is pleased to reveal His glory. And this time, this revelation of His glory is as this pavement or this sea of sapphire or lapis lazuli, this beautiful, brilliant blue, precious stone. It's interesting to see where that stone appears through the Old Testament. It will feature as one of the twelve stones in the high priest's breastplate. But I think more significant for us, if you turn to the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 54, verse 11, when there's comfort being spoken, the people of God pictured as a city that had been under siege, that's now at peace, living in perfect security, the foundation of the redeemed city, lapis lazuli. Or you go to another prophet, the prophet Ezekiel, as he is given this vision of the throne of heaven. The throne is lapis lazuli. So, it's speaking to us of where God rules. It's speaking to us of God's glory. So, they're called up, and they're invited in to meet with the God of glory and to eat and drink in His presence. I don't know how many of us have had memorable meals on a mountain. Maybe some of us, we've gone skiing, and after a busy day's skiing, you've had some wonderful fondue. For me, I think back to a hill walk with a friend up in the highlands, having a picnic right up at the summit. The sky was brilliant blue. There was still snow on the peaks.

[15:20] There was perfect peace. There was deer nestling around. A wonderful couple of hours of peace. But nothing that we have ever or will ever experience in terms of mountain meals will compare with this covenant meal. And it speaks to us of the goal of the covenant. That God has done all of this, this redeeming work, so that He might invite His people all the way in to know Him, to love Him, and to experience His love, to share table fellowship, that sign of acceptance, that sign of friendship.

We sang Psalm 23 this morning. Psalm 23 captures it for us as well. As the imagery in Psalm 23 changes from the shepherd to the king, the king who spreads a table in the wilderness, the king who graciously feeds His people on their pilgrimage through life. Even when there are enemies and opposition around, there is strength for the journey. There is strength for the journey and joy for the journey that comes from the king who delights to invite into fellowship.

This mountain meal, of course, anticipates a still greater one. We began our service in Isaiah chapter 25. On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet, capturing that promise of the new creation as a life of joy in the presence of God. Gone forever, tears and shame and the shroud of death.

Everything that in this life spoils our joy, that creates separation, that ends what is precious to us, those things are in the past never to return because of God's covenant commitment in giving His Son to fix all that is broken, the broken law, sin that leads to death.

God's commitment to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, dying for us, rising for us. And we hear Jesus say, come to me, enjoy life in fellowship with God through knowing me.

[17:59] And trusting Him, we have a taste of that in our lives, but we know the best is yet to come.

Every meal that we share can be an expression of grace. As we give time to spend with others, as we extend hospitality to others, as we express friendship.

That was true of every meal that Jesus shared. And remember how so often Jesus shocked His opponents with who He sat down to have a meal with. Jesus eats with sinners, was the criticism so often.

And Jesus always made plain why He delighted to eat with sinners, because He delighted to extend grace. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to invite people into fellowship.

That table fellowship became a picture of the gospel. That people who deserve nothing receive everything because of the goodness of God in Jesus.

[19:13] And it's absolutely true of the Lord's Supper. When we share the Lord's Supper together, Jesus Christ is still the King who is the host of this meal. He is the one who gladly comes to be present with us, to serve us. We are graced by our wonderful King.

He is present with us to do us good so that this meal becomes for us fuel for our pilgrim journey of faith until we're finally home, where the feasting, where the fellowship, where the joy, where the grace, where the celebration never ends.

Let's think finally about this experience of God's glory that Moses in particular gets to enjoy.

And again, thinking about some of the symbols that we meet in the book of Exodus, here's another one. It's the cloud. Verse 15 onwards, When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.

And then verse 18, Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain, and he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. So the cloud is the symbol of God's presence and God's glory, and we see it throughout the book of Exodus.

[20 : 39] And so you're left with, as we sort of leave behind this covenant ceremony, where do we leave Moses the representative of God's people? We leave him literally enveloped by the glory of God on the top of the mountain.

In this covenant relationship, Moses has already had experiences and encounters of the God of glory, but we're beginning to understand that there are always new and fresh experiences of our glorious God to be had.

And so we have Moses up the mountain, and the glory cloud covers, and God calls. And we fast forward to the New Testament.

We go up another mountain, known as the Mount of Transfiguration. And who do we see there? We see Jesus, our mediator, up there on the mountain.

Moses appears also. And there on the Mount of Transfiguration, and the cloud comes and envelops Jesus and the disciples, and God calls and speaks to the disciples, this is my son.

[21 : 53] I love him. Listen to him. And Jesus, on the mountain, he shines with the glory of God, as if the curtain is pulled back for a moment, revealing his full divinity.

And what the disciples need to see, and need to hear, and so do we, is the glory of the Lord Jesus. Because what Jesus has just said to his disciples sounds like anything but glory to them.

He's just spoken to them that it's necessary for him to suffer and to die. And they think that doesn't look like glory.

And Peter says, Lord, that should never happen to you. But Jesus says it must, and it is at a demonstration of glory. Jesus, in John's gospel especially, will speak often of the cross as a place of glory.

Why? Where is the glory to be found at the cross? Where is glory for the Father? As the Son that he sends lives and then dies in perfect obedience, giving himself a loving sacrifice, completing the eternal plan of salvation, making fellowship between God and sinners possible.

[23 : 21] There is glory at the cross, and there is glory for the Son. Because through his death, his perfect death, he defeats the powers of darkness.

And in the resurrection, he shines as the glorious, victorious, risen Savior. Every time the people of God share the Lord's Supper, we're being reminded of the glory of God in the gospel.

We're invited to taste again God's glory in conquering sin, in defeating death, bringing us into life with God and all through the gift of his Son.

And again, this is the goal of our lives, to know and to enjoy life with the God of grace and glory. And we need this meal.

We need this grace. Because often journeys are hard, and the journey of faith can often feel hard when we have that experience, the road that seems to be leading nowhere, the long walk that seems to take forever.

[24 : 54] perhaps we find ourselves daydreaming about the good meal that we hope to share at the end. God, in his grace, it gives us meals regularly, the Lord's Supper that we share, it's a taste of grace, but we're also given the prospect of a wonderful meal at journey's end.

That's why we read Revelation 19, the wedding supper of the Lamb. Some of us shared in a wedding feast a meal recently, if you've read Babette's Feast, there is something special, isn't there, about the joyful gathering of family and friends when the food is good, when grace is being poured out, and that is how God captures the new creation for his people.

Here is the goal of the covenant, here is the goal of our lives, the joyful feasting of a bride and a groom, of the church and our Savior, the Lord Jesus.

Revelation 19 says, on that day the brides, the church, shall be dressed in white, made perfectly holy to sin no more. And from that day forward, in life with Jesus, the perfect bridegroom, we will taste new dimensions of God's glory for all eternity.

And as we do so, we will be for all eternity. And as we do so, we will be for all eternity.