

Come near to God

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[0:00] Thanks so much. ...be with you all. I've spoken to you a few times via the film through the screen.

! It's not quite the same. It is strange. It did sound odd to say that now Mark was able to see my feet. It is odd, isn't it, to get to know people through a screen and then to see them in person, but here we are.

In person. Now, everyone's been saying to me that we live in a new normal. And, of course, one of the aspects of living in a new normal is that we need to be very careful about where we go, what we do, our distance from people.

So, we could kind of do a bit of an action here. If I was to kind of do this... Well, first, though, this and then this and then this.

I mean, maybe you'd like to follow after me. Yeah, hands and face and space.

[1:17] That's what we've been told a lot, isn't it, at present. And there in that reading, we had that idea of keeping a distance. Should go to the next one.

There we are. Keep your distance. Now, when I walk around, I sometimes wish that I was brave enough to carry a stick that was two meters long, just to remind people of how far they need to be away from me when they're walking.

But I remember the story from the Gospels when Jesus spoke about a man who had a very long stick and a speck. I remember that story, and I realized that perhaps maybe I didn't need to do that. Maybe it was perhaps being a little bit judgmental if people got a little bit closer than two meters away. And we understand why we've had those rules about being two meters away from people because, obviously, that's one of the ways that we keep safe.

But this idea in our reading that people are to keep a distance from God, that's a little bit more difficult to understand. Unless we understand that God is so big and so pure and so beautiful that we need to be very, very careful not to barge in on his presence.

[2:44] Not to assume that we can get too close and personal with him unless he invites us to do so. Most of you, we're told in the reading, you don't get to come close.

Just Moses gets to come close. That's all. Draw near to God. That's one of the great messages of the Bible that God actually does want us to come close.

And Moses comes close so that he can get words from God to tell us about him and to show his life and to show his love and to show the things that he wants for us in his life.

Now, one of the things that's said when the words come to us, and maybe we could repeat these words together, everything the Lord has said, we will do. Could we repeat that nice and loud?

Everything the Lord has said, we will do.

And that's the kind of response that God wants when he speaks to us. Maybe it's the kind of response that parents want when they tell their children what they need to do on a given day.

[3:54] Everything that we say to you, we want you to do. That would be good, wouldn't it? That's the response of the people. Everything you say to us, we will do.

I wonder how you picture obedience. I wonder how the children picture obedience. What do you think it means to be obedient to your parents? You know, sometimes a child can be told one thing in one ear and then it goes out of the other ear and they kind of completely forget what they've been told.

And that can be true about what God says to us as well. We hear God say something to us in his word and we can completely forget what he said.

How do you picture obedience? There's a story in the Bible about two sons. It's a story about one son who says to his dad, I'm going to come and help you.

And then he doesn't. And another son who says, well, I don't know whether I can help you. But then he does go and help him. Obedience looks like doing what you know God really wants in his heart you to do.

[5:11] Of course, there's a problem with this, isn't there? Because one of the Bible words for sin is missing the mark. Missing the point. Missing the target of what God wants.

Of course, recently, there's been lots of news about a story from 1996 when a very fresh-faced Gareth Southgate, the present manager of England, as a footballer, missed a very important penalty against Germany in the semifinals of the Euros.

and I guess he's probably pretty fed up with looking at this particular picture. What are mums?

Well, mums are people who remind you of the things that you did wrong a long time ago. Isn't that true? However old you are sometimes, lots of newspapers have been reminding Gareth Southgate about missing a penalty.

But it's very interesting. This week, and apparently there may well be someone from Germany here today, and sorry about this particular reference, but then, this week, sorry, we're supposed to be getting to the next one, but we're, oh, we are getting to the next one.

[6:23] Then, 2-0 against Germany, the team that Gareth Southgate missed the penalty against, the newspaper say, redemption for Gareth Southgate.

Suddenly, the missed penalty. It's all been put right. There is redemption. Now, it's interesting, isn't it? Have you heard that word before? Have you heard the word redemption before? It's a Bible word.

It's interesting, isn't it, that the newspapers are using a Bible word to talk about a great sporting victory. Redemption means getting back on the same page as God.

It means dealing with our wrong. It means cancelling our wrong, making us clean, making us right with God. In the story, we read that animals were sacrificed and blood was thrown all over the place.

It sounds like a horrific film. But the idea is that blood sets people apart. It makes people clean.

Now, I didn't always wash my hands very carefully, I have to be saying.

[7:35] I'm a kind of typical boy man. But, you know, I've been learning, and I guess you've been learning, about washing your hands. We're told we need to wash our hands for a couple of minutes. And there's lots of ways that we can do that.

They say, wash your hands and sing happy birthday to, if it's anyone's birthday, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Or, a more spiritual one, our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Forgive us this day our sins.

Give us this day our daily bread, rather. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever.

Amen. Well, then your hands should be clean. If you've done one of those kind of things.

And God wants us to be clean and he wants us to feel clean. And our sins make us dirty in God's sight.

[8:42] And that's why God has sent his son into the world to die as a sacrifice, to shed his blood so that we can be forgiven.

and then we can draw near to God. Now, this reading from chapter 24 is referred to in Hebrews that you've been looking at and in Hebrews there's a verse there in chapter 9 that says this, just as people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many and he will appear a second time not to bear sin but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

because of Jesus we no longer need to keep our distance we can come near and we can feel clean.

Amen. We're going to sing our next song the word should appear up here and taking that word there is a redeemer.

Okay. Thank you for the children being attentive during that first bit.

[10:16] I hope that what we do next will be interesting and that you'll feel you're able to be involved in that too.

I want to particularly focus on verses 9 to 11 and perhaps I'll read those again. Moses and Aaron Nadab and Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire clear as the sky itself but God did not raise his hand against those leaders of Israel they saw God and they ate and drank.

The stories in the Old Testament are stories and signposts they are stories of real events things that actually occurred and we do read of space time history when we read about what's written in the Bible but these Old Testament stories are also signposts they point ahead to things that will be revealed more fully they give us a picture of what God is like and they give us a picture of what God is saying but they don't necessarily tell us everything in the Old Testament we have the first not quite formed ideas about God that are going to be fully formed and fully revealed as the New Testament unfolds and Jesus is revealed and in some ways these verses 9 to 11 are some of the most astonishing verses in the Bible let alone the Old Testament but also some of the most puzzling verses in the Bible they tell us about an amazing access and vision an amazing access to God an amazing vision of God the idea that they saw

God they saw God now a number of times in the Bible it says no one can see God and live and as we'll see their vision of God was hazy and incomplete but they did see something and they did experience something about God's presence and I think it's a really important thing to say this morning that in order to know God personally we need to know things about him and in fact in this reading twice we're told that words are given by Moses for the people and words are given in a permanent way they're kind of literally in stone they're etched in stone so that people can see them and keep them and refer to them God speaks to us in words but God wants us to know him God wants us to experience him you see God doesn't simply want us to know about him God doesn't simply want us to have information from him he wants us to be formed by the things that we have heard he wants us to experience him to know him to have dealings with him to be up close and personal with him access and vision now there's something as I said that's amazing about this this narrative it's amazing that God gives this vision of himself to these people it's amazing that God can be seen in this way this is how it's described it's very interesting isn't it if someone says you know I saw a new solar system oh well okay do you mean that you saw a tiny tiny speck of light a long long long way away well yeah that's probably what you're saying not that you saw it all in its detail not that you saw it every facet of that and look at the description of this under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli as bright blue as the sky God lives above the heavens and I suppose if you're going to think of God in human terms everything that is beneath him is blue you know if you're on an airplane and you go above the clouds everything around you is blue it's what you might imagine is beyond the clouds and beyond the skies they have a vision of a pavement that is like precious stones beautiful dazzling shining blue colour it's like this it reminds me of that bit in

[15:24] Ezekiel chapter 1 when Ezekiel speaks about a vision that he has of God and he has to say about seven times it is like this it is like the appearance of a man like the appearance of a man and it's as if the Old Testament writers are having to group for a description that somehow corresponds with what God is like and what they are seeing they're struggling for words they're describing the indescribable and that's of course the task of everyone in the Bible they are describing what's indescribable we see it don't we when the Gospel writers try and describe the resurrection body of Jesus it's almost impossible quite to grasp what it's like to be in a body yet in a body that is somehow transformed they saw the

God of Israel and he was like this shining pathway so at the center of this revelation from Sinai is a vision and chapter 24 is the climax of this covenant this agreement between God and the people at the giving of the ten words the making of a relationship with the people a making of a covenant with the people when Terry Waite was a hostage in the Middle East in Iran he was released in 1991 he

was a hostage for five years and he said that after four years of being a hostage he and his fellow hostages had a surprise gift it was a bowl of red cherries and he said that it was the first fruit that they had seen for four years and it was the first splash of color that they had seen for four years now people tell me you know people who grew up in the second world war they sing a song yes we have no bananas

I remember being in Latvia in 1993 and for the first time ordinary people were able to buy bananas and I remember two ladies who were looking after us we got something to thank them we bought them some flowers flowers are big in Latvia and they were very pleased with the flowers but there were lots of flowers in Latvia and we gave these ladies a bunch of bananas well the flowers made them smile the bananas really made them smile because they hadn't seen them they hadn't tasted them they were kind of off limits for ordinary people and Terry Waite said these cherries fruit the first time in four years after being hostage on a very very meagre diet and beautiful red after the kind of grey Terry Waite was once put in a fridge his mouth taped up and transported in a closed fridge from one room to another and he said with a wistful smile

I can tell you the light does not stay on in the fridge when the door is closed and he said that the hostages when they received these cherries they didn't eat them for a whole day they spent a day just looking at the cherries with wonder with grateful wonder and I think that's a picture that we are to have when we think about these people seeing God seeing something of a representation of God not the whole of him not everything about him that was that was to come in the coming of Jesus and finally in the return of Jesus and a new heaven and a new earth God is good to Israel he makes himself known seeing

God God someone has described the God of Israel the God of the Old Testament as like living close to a high voltage zone you ever seen those places where there's a kind of electricity substation and all the warning signs around it don't come near because it's high voltage it's seriously dangerous and there is something isn't there that appears to be seriously dangerous about God earlier on in Exodus it describes the thunder and the lightning and the awesomeness of God and yet they see him this is a really important time this was a time when God was sorting out his arrangements with the people he was making his covenant he was making things plain and this experience of God's presence was almost as if God was giving them a very tangible a very easy to grasp experience that he is real it's almost as if

[21:05] God is writing his signature and saying yes I'm related to you I'm in relationship with you and it's okay perhaps it's also God saying yes these leaders are the leaders that I'm appointing and that this is the future that I have in mind seeing God is a story it's a story a true story of what happened that they experience something of the likeness of God there's also a signpost in the gospel of John we read these words no one has ever seen God at any time but God the one and only one and only son he has made him known later on in John's gospel Jesus says anyone who has seen me has seen the father this seeing God is a signal a signpost of what

God is going to do finally in the Lord Jesus Christ at the heart of the message of the Bible is God reaching out reaching out to reveal himself to you and to me God wants we sinful creatures to know his presence as we're forgiven as we're drawn near as we're made his through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and this access like with those hostages seeing the bowl of bright red cherries brings a sense of wonder and grateful awe what an amazing thing it is that human beings like you and I can know God this is eternal life that they might know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent that's what it means to be alive human beings walk through life sleeping human beings walk through life in a haze until they woken up and they see!

reality in Jesus Christ see the knowledge of the glory of God what is perhaps more remarkable is that they see God and they are welcomed by God they ate and they drank verse 11 this is a fellowship offering that was offered we're told in this chapter and part of the fellowship offering is that the people get to share something of the offering there is some sense in which they are together not just giving it all away it's shared with God they ate and they drank in the New Testament when Jesus was raised from the dead and the disciples said we have seen the risen Lord one of the evidences that Jesus gives that he really is raised from the dead is to say well come and eat with me there's something very amazing isn't there in human relationships about sitting

down and eating with people

I remember going to a country called Burundi and I asked in Burundi if they would tell me one of their proverbs and I was sitting at a table having a meal and Gideon one of the pastors there leaned over the table and he said to me if you want to see into a man's heart welcome him to your table if you want to see into a man's heart welcome him to your table of course in some cultures around the world to be invited to the table is a sacred thing a special inclusion into the family and here the signal is that God doesn't simply want people to have a glimpse of him he wants them to be intimate with him he wants them to be with him I love that statement in

Revelation 3 and 20 when Jesus comes to the worst church of the seven churches in Revelation that the church with the worst record and gives them the best offer here I stand at the door and knock!

[25:39] if anyone opens I'll come into him and I will eat with him you know in some cultures when you're sitting at the table and eating you really are included and here God is saying through the signal he wants to include people in his family circle from this intimacy comes words verse 12 the two stones with the ten words upon it when God is close to us when God has drawn us close to himself then we're in the position to hear what he has to say it's interesting isn't it that lots of words can be spoken in life but sometimes words just criss cross and go here and there and everywhere but there are moments aren't there when people sit us down and they say just slow down a minute

I've got something important to say to you just take note of this we have a God who's spoken ten words on two stones many words in the two testaments of the Bible all scripture given to us useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training righteousness so that God might bring us near well Moses and the people are near the cloud and Moses goes up into the cloud it's kind of a cool thing isn't it we kind of think what comes into your mind when I use the word cloud everything is in the cloud isn't it my pictures my files my emails the church website it's all in the cloud isn't it everything's there you know if you've got the cloud and

Amazon and Tesco everything's cool isn't it there's a sense of which there's a symbol here a signal here of the cloud that envelops God the mountain where Moses meets God that everything is indeed here because God is here God is communicating with Moses 40 days 40 nights on that hill mountains are special in biblical terms when Jesus comes to the world in Matthew's gospel many times he meets with people on mountains there's one particular occasion when Jesus is on a mountain and Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain with him Moses the man that we see here going into the cloud meeting God on the mountain in Luke's gospel we're told that Jesus and Moses and Elijah have a conversation and they're having a conversation about Jesus' exodus his way out of life his way out of life through death and there's an amazing word that comes from the cloud on the mountain this is my son listen listen to him someone has said that the old testament is a story looking for a conclusion the old testament is a story looking for a conclusion it's a signal pointing away from itself to something else and somewhere else the bible is telling a story about God's initial intimacy with human beings as he makes them and places them in a garden of perfection it's a story about intimacy lost through disobedience and it's a story about intimacy re-won and re-offered through

Jesus God's son perfectly obedient for us and dying for our disobedience in order that we might know God personally this is a story but also a signpost God is real God speaks to us God wants to know us and God wants us to experience that in a personal way you see what this story is signaling is a message that we see so often in the bible draw near to God draw near to God I like that statement in Hebrews that says let us approach the throne of grace with confidence that we might receive mercy and grace to help in time of need all of us have been in the place where we've messed up in our lives when we failed to do the right thing when we've disobeyed when we felt dirty and unacceptable we've all been there we all need mercy and all of us know what it is to live in life when we feel we're out of our depth that we're not quite sure how we're going to face the next step there is grace to help us in time of need the signal is the living

[31:43] God is real the living God is near draw near draw near through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that you might know God as your heavenly father that you might know security with him now we're not going to have

our final him no okay okay um thank you for your patience this morning um sorry for the modicum of chaos that has surrounded my visit to you um we're going to pray together let's all pray heavenly father we thank you for the wonderful thing it is to be able to draw near to you and we do that today we draw near and we thank you that we draw near and that we are promised mercy and we all stand in need of that none of us are perfect none of us are even approaching perfect father we are all of us sinners have fallen short of your glory but father we thank you that we can come in the name of

Jesus and experience cleansing and welcome thank you that Jesus is described this man welcome sinners and eats with them but father god we do want to please you we do want to live for you and we pray that you will give us grace to help in time of need we pray for all the strength that we need to face today and tomorrow father god we don't know what tomorrow may hold for us maybe some of us here are anxious about!

the future! about the big decision problem that we're facing something that breaks our heart father we pray for grace to help in time of need how we thank you today that you have sent your son Jesus that we might know that you are real that we might experience life in abundance in knowing you help us each one to draw near for we ask it in Jesus name amen may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him that you might overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit amen amen