

SUMMER 5 - Tying the Knot

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it was the last Saturday of January 1993, and John McCarthy picked up Brian Keenan, and together they went to Brockstead Church for a service to dedicate two new stained glass windows.

Now, the stained glass windows commemorated the five years that these men had been kept prisoners in Lebanon. In the middle of one stained glass window is a picture of a bowl of cherries. After being released, the men told the story of this particular event, the story of the cherries.

They had been kept in a series of different places of confinement for four years. Each of those places was largely dark and unlit.

It offered no view of the outside world. Then, in their fourth year of such imprisonment, they were given a bowl of red cherries. It was the first fruit and the first colour they had seen for four years.

The men described how they were eager to taste the fruit, but they could not. The colour and the anticipation were just too much for them.

[1 : 1 1] And so, for a whole day, they simply gazed upon the cherries in wonder and gratitude. And finally, they consumed the fruit.

Now, the story of this bowl of cherries is one I want you to keep in mind today as we look at Exodus 24. We're going to concentrate on just largely on that chapter, chapter 24.

And at the end of us looking at Exodus 24, I want to return to it and I want to draw some lessons from it that will help us think about Exodus 24 and the themes that I believe arise from that chapter.

But now, let's go to the book of Exodus. And to start off, I want to do some remembering as to where we were. And first, let's just take a look at the larger context of the book. Now, if you look at the back page of your outline, you will see that I have put together a very rough summary of the book of Exodus.

You can see that I put everything into two columns. The column with God at the top means that the focus is on God and his actions in the things that come underneath.

[2 : 1 6] And the column with humans at the top means that the focus is on humans and their response. It doesn't mean that one doesn't occur in the other, but largely the focus is on those things. So in chapters 1 to 14, we could say that the focus is on God's action in delivering his people out of slavery.

There's lots of people there and lots of involvement of people and so on, but the focus is on what God is doing. In chapter 15, the humans respond in praise on the other side of the sea, exclaiming the great goodness of God's redemption.

Then in chapters 15 to 18, God acts again to preserve his people. And then chapters 19 to 25 or 24, the focus falls on the covenant. They're the chapters we have been looking at these last few times together.

In chapter 19, God reveals himself at Mount Sinai. And if you could, if we could put it this way, declares the covenant. Then he gives the 10 words in chapter 20. Then he gives the book of the covenant in chapters 21 to 23.

And then in chapter 24, he establishes the covenant. So that's the larger context of where we've been to up until this point. As you can see, chapters 19 and chapter 24 bracket the section that we are looking at.

[3 : 33] Exodus 19 and 24 are, if you would like to put it this way, the bread in the sandwich, as it were. They hold everything together.

They are closely linked. Exodus 19 begins the section on the covenant. God reveals himself. He declares his covenant. Exodus 24 records him establishing or ratifying that covenant.

In the original language, both chapters have seven references to God speaking or to God's word. Chapter 19 has seven references to going down, while chapter 24 has seven references to going up.

In other words, the content and the structure of these chapters indicate they're to be read in the light of each other. They're taken together. They describe God's formalizing of this relationship with his people.

He has rescued them, brought them up out of Egypt. Now he's formalizing their relationship. Back in Genesis, of course, God enacted his covenant with Abraham personally.

[4 : 40] Now God formalizes the covenant with the entire nation that has descended from Abraham. He's the one who called Abraham their forefather. And he's the one who, back in chapter 2, remembered that relationship with their forefather Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and rescued them.

Now he's going to give some shape to the relationship that has been formed. So he talks about a covenant or if you like, it's not exactly the same thing, but a contract with them. And in Exodus 19, he declares that this is what he is doing.

In Exodus 19, the people hear that this is what God is about. And they give this universal assent. With one voice, they say, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

Now Exodus 24 then takes up this theme. Now, let's go through the chapter and let's see how the story progresses. And I want you to look at the steps that are involved and as they evolve.

We all know that the people are gathered around the base of Mount Sinai. In verses 1 and 2, God calls Moses to bring Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders and to ascend the mountain.

[5 : 52] The elders probably function, I think, as representatives of the people of God. Anyway, in verse 2, it said that there is to be a separation between Moses and the others at one particular point. At some point, he is to separate from them and go on on his own.

Now, I think what happens in verse 3 is that we're back down the bottom of the mountain. Moses then orally outlines the commandments to the assembled people that are there down the bottom.

Having heard what Moses says, the people bind themselves in obedience. You can hear it again, can't you? And look at verse 3. Use the same formula they have used in chapter 19, verse 8.

And they say, everything the Lord has said, we will do. They are very keen. But not very successful, as we will see in the coming weeks.

So in verse 4, Moses commits to writing everything that God had said into writing. And second half of verse 4, there's some sort of sacrificial ritual and blood rite begins.

- [6 : 52] At the foot of the mountain, where the people are, an altar is made. Presumably, the altar represents the presence of God and will be the place where sacrifices can be offered.
- And then 12 pillars are constructed, representing, I presume, the 12 tribes of Israel. And then some young men are found. I'll tell you why I think the young men are found. Because it's a fairly strenuous activity of slaughtering and preparing the sacrifices that they're about to do.
- So young men, good to go about this task. Anyway, blood is gathered from the sacrifices. And verse 6 indicates that half of it is put into bowls. The other half is sprinkled on the altar.
- And in verse 7, the written document that Moses had been working on is read to all the people. It's called the Book of the Covenant. Here's a little exercise for you later on. You might go and do a word search on Book of the Covenant.
- See where else it occurs within Scripture. I'll give you a clue. Have a look in 1 and 2 Kings. Anyway, it is read aloud to the people. And look at the last part of verse 7.
- [7 : 56] Here they go again, the very keen ones. They assent and they respond with this word. We will do everything the Lord has said we will obey. Even, you know, add the word obey in there. And in verse 8, the blood rite is completed by Moses.
- Sprinkling blood on the people or perhaps on the pillars that represent them. And look at the language he uses. See if you recognize part of it from somewhere. Listen to it carefully.
- Verse 8b. This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with these words. Now, later on, I'll give you a little clue about this.
- But you think about the words. In verse 9, the people we heard about in verse 1 ascend partway up the mountain. Look at the description of what happened in verse 10.
- Verse 10 says that the elders of Israel went up. They saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.
- [8 : 56] It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? Here's God revealing himself in his majesty to these people. They see God. But verse 11 says that God did not raise his hand against these leaders.
- And remarks at this particular, this remarkable thing. That you should see God and God should not, you know, wipe you out, as it were. Then it goes even further. Not only did they see God, but...
- And not only did he not wipe them out, as it were, but they ate and drank with him. In other words, these representatives engage in a solemn, covenantal meal with God.
- That brings us to verse 12. And in these final few verses of the chapter, God urges Moses to come back up the mountain and to receive the formal documents of the covenant from God.
- And that is, he's to go up and receive, I presume, the tablets of stone and the law and the commandments which God had written for the instruction of the people. In verse 13, Moses goes up the mountain as commanded and Joshua is with him.
- [9 : 59] And in verses 13 and 14, there's an indication that Moses thinks he's going to be up on the mountain for some time because he proceeds to make sure the people know how things are to be governed while he's away.
- Okay, so I think he knows it's going to be a little while. Then in verse 15, he goes up the mountain and the glory of God envelops the whole of the mountain. For on the seventh day, God called to Moses from within the cloud and down the bottom of the mountain, the glory of God.

As he looked up on Mount Sinai, the glory of God was visible. It looked like a fire just consuming the whole top of the mountain.

And Moses goes into it, disappears up there for 40 days and 40 nights. That's a summary of the chapter. Now, I need to tell you that the blood ritual performed here, the one that we've seen, is almost unique in the Old Testament.

The only thing that is anything like it occurs in Leviticus 8 and involves the ordination of Aaron as high priest. What's more, nowhere in the Old Testament do we have an explanation of what this event means.

[11 : 11] We've got to work it out from the context and so on and have a go at what we think it is. I think we can have a good guess as to its meaning. And to do this, I think the best thing is to imagine the scene.

So, just in your, I think often this occurs, particularly in Old Testament sacrificial imagery. One of the best things to do is to walk your way through it. To do some imagining.

To maybe even act it out. Now, think about it. Significant numbers of animals have been slaughtered. Burnt offerings are made.

Which are generally connected with atonement for sin and consecration. Fellowship offerings that are made celebrate fellowship with God, relationship with God.

Anyway, in the process of these offerings, blood is gathered. Lots and lots and lots of it. You split it up into two. Half is splattered at the base of the altar that represents the presence of God.

[12 : 06] Half is splattered on the people. Life has been shed to initiate this covenant. Do you understand that? So, life has been shed in order to initiate this covenant.

This covenant involves obligations between two parties. And these two parties are bound together in solidarity. They belong to each other.

The book of the covenant makes this possible. The blood of the covenant binds them together. They are inextricably bound to each other.

They belong to each other, if you'd like to say. And the covenant belongs to them jointly. So, there is Exodus 24. Now, what I want to do now is think what this passage means in the larger framework of the Bible.

We've been doing that this whole last couple of weeks. And I want to do more of it today. Now, at this point, I can say there are lots of ways we could go here. Lots and lots of ways. For example, we could pursue the whole idea of covenants in the Bible.

[13 : 08] We could start with God's covenant with creation. And we could go through to the new covenant in the New Testament. Or we could take a look at how Jesus takes this chapter in the language of the Lord's Supper.

Did you recognize it when I read it to you earlier on? So, Jesus hones in on this chapter, in other words, when he thinks about the Lord's Supper. And each of those exercises would be a very profitable thing for us to do.

But tonight, I want to concentrate on one small section of this chapter. I want to concentrate on two ideas that spring out of this chapter and that are taken up elsewhere in the Bible.

Both come in the same small section. The first has to do with a covenantal meal. And the second has to do with seeing God. Both ideas are taken up elsewhere in the Bible.

Let's deal with the covenant meal first. Look at Exodus 24, 9 to 11. 9 to 11. I'll read it to you again. That's a delightful picture.

[14 : 24] Here are the representatives of God's people. They are allowed to come up this mountain, at least part of the way. And God gives them a small glimpse of himself.

They behold God. And then they sit down and they eat a meal in his presence. Here is a small snapshot, friends, of God's intention for the world.

You see, when God created the world, he created us a place where he could have untainted, unspoiled relationship with human beings.

That is what Eden was about. Being there with God. In his presence. Relating to him. Seeing him. Not being scared of him. Not having any fear that he would burst out upon you.

That's what was there. That's what Eden was like. And once you left Eden, you longed for that to return. God's desire for his world and for people in it is that.

[15 : 25] That they live an untainted, unfettered relationship with him. What he wants of his human creation is to be able to sit down with the people he has made and enjoy their presence as they enjoy his.

Now what happens on the mountain on the first day of the ratification of the covenant is in one sense what God wants every day of his covenant. He wants to be, to put it in very simple terms, friends.

He wants a friendship where the parties involved have nothing to hide. As they didn't have anything to hide in Genesis 2. And now the sad part of the story is that this intimacy pictured here, halfway up this mountain, did not last.

Within a few short weeks, it was shattered by idolatry and breach of covenant by God's people. And I don't mean just tinkered with. It was shattered by their sin.

Some of the chief ringleaders are the very people who are present here at this gathering on the mountain. It's incredible.

[16 : 34] And the end result is that the prophets of God began to look forward to a day when that ideal that we had just this one little snapshot of. Or actually there are a few more in scripture before this time.

But this one ideal would return. You see, the prophets longed for a day when God and humans would sit down in friendship and solidarity again.

You get a small snapshot of it in the Old Testament in places such as Isaiah 25. And in your Bibles, I'd like you to look at Isaiah 25. Isaiah 25, 6 to 9.

So follow up with me in your Bibles. I want you to notice a location. A mountain is involved. Now let me read these verses to you.

Because God speaks through Isaiah the prophet. And he says this. On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.

[17 : 34] A banquet of aged wine. The best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain, he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations.

He will swallow up death forever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces. He will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken. In that day, they will say, surely this is our God. We trusted in him and he saved us. This is the Lord. We trust in him.

Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation. You see the picture? A picture of a saved people from all over in the presence of God, supping with him.

And the Lord of hosts himself will spread a table. Not just for Israel. Not just for a select group of humans, but for all nations, all peoples. And the table will be covered with the richest of food.

[18 : 39] It will have the best aged wine. The veil that covers his presence and his glory will be stripped away. Sin will be dealt with. And the consequences of sin, that is death, will also be done away with.

God will reach his hand out and wipe the tears of suffering and pain from the eyes of those gathered. And all the peoples of the earth will rejoice in salvation.

What a wonderful picture this is. Now that in mind, go to the book of Revelation. So flip right to the end of your Bibles to Revelation 19.

Revelation 19 verses 7 to 9. Let us rejoice.

And be glad. And give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come. And his bride has made herself ready.

[19 : 43] Fine linen, bright and clean, was given to her to wear. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's people. And then the angel said to me, write, sorry, write this, blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

And he added, these are the true words of God. Now the picture, did you notice, is just slightly different here. It is not just a meal. It's a special meal.

A marriage supper. And at the centre of the marriage supper is a bride and a bridegroom. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ.

He has made the marriage possible by his sacrifice on the cross. He is the Lamb who was slain. But then is standing, as in Revelation 5.

The bride is all of those who have believed in what Jesus has done. For he has brought them into unfettered relationship with God. This is the salvation promised in Isaiah 25.

[20 : 44] He is the one who has lowered the veil that surrounds God. The one who has caused that curtain to be torn apart. The one who has caused death to be swallowed up. The one we have waited for.

Now this idea of a meal with God, or fellowship with God, is linked with the next idea I want to pursue. And that is seeing God. You see, if you are eating in the presence of God, I presume you see his face, don't you?

You see, you can see him. That's what this is about. And he can see you. Now to explore this idea, I want you to come with me to Mark chapter 9.

So let's turn to Mark 9. Reading this passage is a little risky because it raises more questions than I'm going to answer.

So, anyway, let's have a look at it. Verse 2. After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up to a high mountain where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white.

[22 : 01] Whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, Rabbi, it's good for us to be here.

Let us put up three shelters. One for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah. He didn't know what to say. They were so frightened. Then a cloud appeared and covered them. And a voice came from the cloud. This is my son whom I love.

Listen to him. And suddenly when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone except Jesus. Now, the first thing I want you to recognize are the similarities between Exodus 24 and these verses.

I wonder if you notice some of them. First, there are three disciples or three other people that accompany Jesus, just as Aaron, Nadab and Abihu accompany Moses. Perhaps not that significant, just interesting.

Second, Jesus alone is transfigured, just as Moses alone sees the glory of the Lord in chapter 24, verse 2. And later, if you read just a little bit on in Exodus, you'll find he bears the mark of that meeting in a transfigured face.

- [23 : 06] Do you remember that? Which he has to hide. You can read about that in Exodus 34. A third, there's a voice from the cloud, just as God spoke in Exodus 24, verse 16.
- So you've got, again, a voice from God. But there's something unique about Mark 9, isn't there? Can you see it? The thing that is different here is that God's revelation of himself is not mediated as it was at Sinai.
- It is direct. I mean, there's a directness in Exodus, but not like this. God shines solely through Jesus. God shines directly through Jesus.
- He is God's glory. That's the picture of the New Testament as a whole. You most graphically see it in John's Gospel. So flip back to John's Gospel, to the passage we read earlier on.
- And you will have noticed it when we read it. John chapter 1, verse 18. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
- [24 : 21] You see, if you've met Jesus, you have met God. Now look at John 14. So flip over a few pages to John 14. And I'm going to read this whole passage.
- Often read at funerals, because of the first few verses. But it's a very rich passage. Look at it. John 14, 1-9. Do not let your hearts be troubled.
- You believe in God. Believe also in me. My father's... Notice the link between believing in God, believing also in him. My father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I go there to prepare a place for you?
- And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am. You know the place where I'm going. And Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you're going.
- How can we know the way? And Jesus answered, I'm the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. And if you really know me, you will know my Father as well.
- [25 : 20] From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Can you hear that? From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Because if you've seen me, you've seen the Father.
- Go on. And you can see this in the next few verses. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. And Jesus answered, don't you know me, Philip? Even after I've been among you for such a long time, anyone who's seen me has seen the Father.
- How can you say, show us the Father? You see, if you've seen Jesus, you have seen God. It's as strong as it sounds. And we read over it and we don't really grasp what it's saying.
- But Jesus is clear. To come face to face with Jesus is to come face to face with God. He is the radiance of God's glory, the exact imprint of his nature, as Hebrews 1 says.
- But the New Testament authors go one step further. For where they personally meet Jesus face to face, we don't have that luxury, do we? I have not met Jesus face to face.
- [26 : 29] They have. But what they do is leave their writings for us. And in their writings, you too can meet Jesus face to face.
- We too can have fellowship with him and fellowship with his Father. Flip in your Bibles again to 1 John this time. 1 John chapter 1. So 1 John chapter 1.
- 1 John chapter 1.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make your joy complete. Can you see what's being said? As we read the scriptures and all that they say about Jesus, we are brought into, and we believe it, we are brought into the fellowship that they have.

It is as good as being where they are. The language is clear. John and the apostles heard, saw, touched him who was the word of life. They testified to and proclaimed what they had experienced.

[27 : 56] And they did this so that we too might have that same fellowship, that same relationship, that same dynamic of relationship with Jesus and with his Father. Their teaching, their proclamation is our way of access into what they experienced.

And what I want to do tonight is to close by returning to the bowl of cherries that I mentioned at the beginning. The word of the captives of Lebanon are dark.

Their world was dark. It was untouched by colour or the taste of the good things of life. For years they languished. And then after four years came the glow of some ripe red cherries.

And it was more than their senses could take at once. All they could do was to sit in the presence of such grandeur and just observe for a day.

In awe. Now friends, how much more grand is it for sinners to be brought into the very presence of the living God?

[29 : 07] If a bowl of cherries can do it for you. Sinners into the presence of the living God.

To sit down at a table for a meal of friendship and fellowship. That's what happened at Mount Sinai that day.

And that's what happened at the Mount of Transfiguration. And friends, let me tell you that that is what happens when we receive Jesus Christ. And all that he has won for us on the cross.

We are friends, if you are believers in the Lord Jesus. Seated in the heavenly places. In the presence of God.

You are there. The core of Christian faith is this. That we have been brought into relationship with God through Jesus.

[30 : 10] And in him we see God. This experience of being overpowered by the grace of God. Overwhelmed by it. The touch of the hand of God when we feel his presence and forgiveness in spite of our sin.

Because it has been dealt with. The experience of knowing that we who were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Christ. This knowledge and experience of Christ is the very guts of Christian faith. And it's something that the true Christian can never leave for very long. The true Christian never tires of this.

Never wearies of it. Never tires about hearing about Jesus. Never tires in going back to Jesus. Never becomes weary of the delight of finding him yet again.

Let me explain by telling you this little exercise I did for this Bible talk. I picked up a New Testament epistle at random. The one I selected was the epistle to the Ephesians. And I decided I'd read Ephesians and record every direct reference to Jesus.

[31 : 20] Okay. I'd write down every time when the word Jesus, Lord, Christ, he or any other reference to Jesus occurred. Okay. It's not a hard exercise.

You could do this with another epistle yourself and see how Ephesians compares. I'm not talking about allusions. These are direct references. Now, let me tell you the results of my findings.

There are 157 verses in Ephesians. How many references to Jesus do you think there might be in the 157 verses? Well, I know because I counted them.

There are 108. 108 out of 157 verses. That is a phenomenal thing to observe, isn't it? Sometimes you can't have...

There are a number of verses where there are three references to Jesus in one verse. That's a phenomenal thing. You see, what does that tell you about the Apostle Paul, along with the other Apostles?

[32 : 19] It tells you that they are infatuated with Jesus. They cannot leave him alone for more than a few sentences. He saturates their thinking.

He saturates their words. He's never much out of their vocabulary. And every true Christian since then has followed in their footsteps. Just think about the structure of the New Testament itself.

Reflect on it. You're thinking about putting together a compilation that will reflect what Christian faith is all about. How do you go about it? Those who completed the New Testament in the first couple of centuries of Christian history were not happy with just having one gospel narrative.

No. They wanted the story to be told over and over again. So they told it over four times. Four little... Four different perspectives on the same story.

Why? Because it was the story. There wasn't a better story to be told. You might as well tell it four times. Do it well. Four gospels.

[33 : 26] They wanted Jesus to be seen from every possible perspective. They excluded some because they weren't the right perspective on Jesus. You see, they had all experienced what Moses and Aaron could only imagine if they could imagine at all.

They had experienced unfettered access to the God of all the world. And one day they would sit down with him again and in an endless party with him. But I suspect that the first stage of that party will be preceded by something else.

You see, I suspect that like the captives in Lebanon, the first thing that we shall do is simply gaze in wonder and awe. Please understand what I'm saying, friends.

It's very important to hear this. If you are bored with Jesus, if you're tired of hearing about him, if you're looking for something more, then I ask you to wonder if there might be something wrong at the core of your faith.

For Jesus is the beginning and the end. The Alpha and the Omega. The first and the last. The source of your salvation. And the goal of your salvation.

[34 : 42] He is where relationship with God starts and finishes. And to see him. To apprehend him. Is to see the Father.

And to be brought with boldness. Into his presence. And to fellowship with Jesus. Is to fellowship with God himself.

And to see his face. What a wonderful privilege that is. Let us pray. Let us pray.