

Our Gracious and Holy God

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[0 : 00] Well, let me begin by asking you who you think you know really well. Maybe it's your mum, or your dad, or your husband or wife, or maybe your best friend, the one that you've known since kinder.

Has it ever occurred to you that though you think you know them well, they've done or said something that surprised you and made you think, well, you don't really know them that well after all.

Or maybe that person is you. You've often encountered people making assumptions about you as though they knew you but don't. So they speak on your behalf or they do things without asking you first.

And then they say, well, I thought that's what you wanted. Well, I have to confess that I've been guilty of that. I've made assumptions about others only to discover that, surprise, surprise, not everyone thinks or acts like me.

Fancy that. Well, let me ask you this same question about God then. How well do you think you know God? So if I ask you to describe God's character with one word, what would it be?

[1 : 21] You don't have to share it with anyone. But keep that word in your mind. Because in a while, you'll be able to compare it with what we find in our passage tonight.

Now, if you recall, having left Egypt, God's directed Israel southeast into the desert. And in the opening verses of Exodus chapter 19, we find them camped out in front of Mount Sinai.

God is about to hand them the law via Moses. But first, Israel had to prepare to meet the Lord. And so a series of instructions are being put to them through Moses.

So look with me in verse 3 where we begin our reading. It says, Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession.

[2 : 33] Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

So to begin with, these are not instructions just yet. Rather, God is explaining his relationship with them. What he has done for them and his intentions for them going forward.

And what we see is just how gracious God is. And this is my first point for tonight on the slide, that the Lord is a gracious God.

It's a beautiful image, isn't it? If ever you've seen an eagle in full flight, it's majestic, isn't it?

Powerful, yet effortless.

And that's what God's rescue of Israel is like. He's plucked them out of Egypt from slavery and about to place them in the promised land.

[3 : 33] But more than that, God says he's actually bringing them to himself. He desires to enter into a relationship with them. That's what the covenant is there for.

A promise-based relationship. And in this case, it's between God and Israel. Of course, as we've already seen in Exodus so far, all this is down solely to God's grace.

Israel has done nothing. They couldn't. All they could do was cry out in helplessness. Nor were they deserving of this rescue either.

We've already seen heaven. And we, in the last few chapters, how their grumbling has brought them into disrepute. And yet, verse 5, out of all the nations, Israel alone will be God's treasured possession.

It's like an illustration I've used before. Israel is that special teddy bear that a child gets to take on their holidays, whereas all the other stuffed toys get left home at home in the box.

[4 : 40] Now, why is God doing this? Well, he says, so that they might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Holy, of course, has the idea of being set apart, of being pure and undefiled.

God's desire is that they become a model nation, much as the whole earth should be. It was meant to be like back in the Garden of Eden, where people were in right relationship with God, the Creator.

But, of course, this is no longer possible because of sin, because of human rebellion against God's rule. And so God will use Israel as His test case.

He will enter into covenant with them and ask them to keep the covenant by obeying Him. That's why they're now at Mount Sinai. God is about to reveal Himself and give them His laws to obey. But we need to remember the secrets. God's gracious rescue came first. It was His initiation of relationship that comes first. The requirement to keep the law comes after that.

[5 : 55] They weren't to keep it to earn God's grace, but rather to respond to it. Well, when Moses put God's covenant to the elders in verse 8, the people responded by saying on the slide, we will do everything the Lord has said.

And so I'm going to keep reading now the next section. But as I do, try and take note of all the details that show of the extent of separation between God and Israel.

You might even want to jot them down as I go. So take note of how God is so separate from Israel. So verse 9, The Lord said to Moses, I'm going to come to you in a dense cloud so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.

Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. And the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day.

Because on that day, the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it.

[7 : 09] Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. They are to be stoned or shot with arrows. Not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal should be permitted to live.

Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain. After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations. On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.

Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

[8 : 11] The Lord descended to the top of the mountain and caught Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the Lord said to him, Go down and warn the people so that they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish.

Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them. Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up Mount Sinai because you yourself warned us, put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.

The Lord replied, Go down and bring Aaron up with you, but the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord or he will break out against them.

So Moses went down to the people and told them. Well, I wonder which details you picked up. Here's my list on the next slide.

I've got a few. Hopefully I've got them all. First, did you notice how often Moses had to go up and down the mountain just to relay God's word to the people?

[9 : 16] All told, I think it's about four times. It's as though God couldn't speak to them directly or that Moses had to bring the answer to him or he wouldn't know.

Well, of course we know that that's not really it, is it? But rather God was trying to demonstrate something, wasn't he? Notice too how God wants the people to see clearly that God was speaking to them through Moses, that they needed a mediator.

Well, second, before the people could come up to the mountain or even approach it, they had to prepare to meet the Lord. Take three days to wash themselves and their clothes.

Make sure it's dry, I think, before putting them on again. And in verse 15, Moses even tells them to abstain from sex. Not because it was sinful, but I think so that they don't risk dirtying their clothes. So that's the second detail which is on the slide. And then thirdly, they are to keep off the mountain. Limits are put around it so they can't even touch the foot of it.

[10:28] If they did, God would break out against them. Likewise, the priests, before they approached, they had to consecrate themselves. Only Aaron and Moses could come up.

And then fourthly, the final one, there is smoke and cloud and the loud sound of trumpets. If you read closely, actually, all these are simply the prelude, aren't they?

God's presence itself would descend into the midst of that. The smoke and the trumpet was not God's presence at all, but just to prepare the way, almost as if to create a sound and a visual barrier before God descended.

You can imagine what an awesome sight that would have been, so much so that the people trembled, rightly I think, before God. Now, what's the point of all this? I think it's pretty clear, isn't it? It's to show just how holy God is. what His holiness is really like. It's a glimpse into what His true nature is.

[11:38] And it's rather stark, isn't it? They go through such lengths to meet God, and yet, when the time came, they could barely even get close.

Only Moses and Aaron could do that, and even so, they couldn't see God face to face even then. Now, let me be clear here.

God was doing this not because He was being vindictive or anything, to smite them out of fun or anything. No, God was doing this for the people's safety.

His very nature is like fire, and would consume them just like paper would be burnt by fire. It's almost as if God has to keep them at a distance, and appoint Moses as the mediator, so that the sinful nature of the people would not cause their destruction in God's presence.

I wonder whether you begin to see what God's dilemma is. He so loved Israel, He said, that He would swoop into Egypt and carry His people on English wings to rescue them.

[12:53] He so loves them that He calls them His treasured possession, and yet, the unrestrained intimacy between God and His people is not possible. It sort of makes verse 6 all the more ironic.

And impossible, isn't it? If you go back to verse 6, which is on the slide as well, see what God says, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And yet, in these very next verses, we see just how unholy Israel is. How far short of God's holy standard they are.

That's why the prophet Isaiah would lament in his prophecy chapter 64, verse 6, which is on the next slide, all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. And that's the reality for Israel. Even their righteous acts are like filthy rags before God.

[14:03] not because they act necessarily unrighteous in the first place, but just because the people doing them are sinful by nature. That nature taints everything that they do.

And yet, despite Israel's unholiness, God is gracious to them. God bends over backwards, as it were, to facilitate his relationship with them.

It comes at a great cost to his reputation. He goes out of the way to make it happen. That's why I often say Peter Adam, who is a former principal of Ridley College, he often says that the laws and sacrificial system that God puts into place aren't primarily to allow a sinful people to approach a holy God, but rather to enable a holy God to dwell with sinful people and not destroy them in the process.

Friends, remember when I asked at the start, what's the word you would use to describe God's character? Well, what was that word?

Did gracious or holy come to mind? Or something similar like that, loving, compassionate or righteous? Think about it, gracious and holy aren't words we often put together.

[15 : 31] do we? Particularly when we think of humans. When we think gracious, we think kind, caring, forgiving. On the other hand, holy we equate to being strict.

No flexibility to deviate from right or wrong. And yet, God is both gracious and holy. They're both intrinsic to His nature.

grace. Now, if you think harder, it's actually true, isn't it? The concept of grace actually doesn't make sense without holiness.

Is that right? Grace is required only when someone has done wrong. Where there's a righteous standard or holy standard, they've failed. At the same time, there's something holy about grace, isn't it?

Which makes a gracious person noble and pure that sets them apart from other people. Well, God isn't like us.

[16 : 40] When humans are gracious, it's often because we realize that we might need grace shown to us sometime down the future. be gracious now, be generous now, because one day you may need it yourself.

But God isn't gracious because He needs it in return. He's perfect, incapable of falling short. And yet He forgives and shows grace.

He reaches out to those who have failed Him, people like Israel, people like us. He does that because it's in His very nature to be gracious.

And yet our sin goes against His holiness. It's like a stench that's revolting to Him, but He holds His nose and puts up with it just in order to dwell with His people.

And so, of course, this great tension for God, this great dilemma is finally resolved in His Son Jesus who comes to take away the stench of sin, who offers Himself as a sacrifice on our behalf, so that a holy God could dwell with sinful people.

[17 : 54] And of course, Jesus reflected His Father's perfect character. For though He Himself was pure and holy, when He was on earth, He ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors.

That's why, if we look again at John's prologue, we did that last week, but this time in John 1, verse 14, it says, The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Truth being the proxy for the idea of holiness, of course.

Friends, how well do you know God? And how well, in particular, do you know the God of the Bible? Because often we think we know God, don't we?

We may even in our heads know that He's holy and gracious, but is it merely a superficial understanding of it? You see, I suspect we don't really know how gracious God is until we really know how holy He is.

[19 : 09] And I don't think we know how holy God is until we realize just how sinful we are. This week, as I was driving past a major intersection in Richmond, I saw a team of workers, I think they're employing them, all the councils are doing them nowadays, a team of workers down at the intersection sanitizing everything.

So they had a bucket and a cloth and they were giving everything inside a wipe down. The benches, the bike racks, the sign posts, even the wooden posts that were supporting an morning, they were just wiping everything down.

Now I suppose it's meant to be effective and I think it is, but I couldn't help thinking and wondering whether they were transferring the virus from one thing to the other with that same piece of cloth. The cloth itself looked clean, but surely after a while, particularly as they weren't always dipping it into the sanitizer and they were wiping, there was a risk, wasn't there, transmission on the cloth itself, using the cloth.

It's funny isn't it, how things have changed in the matter of two months prior to COVID-19. Who would have thought that even the air we breathe could be contaminated?

[20 : 28] Australia is meant to be the country with the best air quality, but all of a sudden, I was just at the shopping centre the other day doing essential things, but I found myself trying not to inhale as I was walking past people.

It's all rather like sin, isn't it? Like the air, our righteous acts may look clean on the surface, but as Isaiah said, it's tainted like dirty rags.

Even when we do good, even when we have good intentions, we sort of taint them or defile them with our hidden motives, don't we? Or our moral blind spots?

How many times have we tried to do good and then still end up making a mess of it? When we realise the depths of our sin, set against God's holiness, that's when we see the extent of God's grace, the length He went to to save us by sending His Son to die on the cross for us.

That's when we realise how costly Jesus' death was. That's when we realise how precious it is for us so that we might be in relationship with Him.

[21 : 46] But of course we balance that with the knowledge that no matter how deep our sin, when we turn to God through Christ, then we get to hear God say to us, You are holy and precious in my sight.

You are my treasured possession, just as Israel was. In other words, there is no need to feel shame or guilt or fear, even though we are sinful, in the presence of God's holiness.

The loud trumpet, the fire, the smoke that struck fear in the people of Israel is now muted and shielded by the cross of Jesus.

But even as we have this great confidence to approach God, we hear Peter say in 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 15 and 16 on the next slide, this is what God says to us, but just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.

For it is written, be holy because I am holy. And then later on in our New Testament reading from tonight, in chapter 2 verse 9, but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

[23 : 11] Once you were not a people, but now you are people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. And so that's how from tonight's passage we are to respond to God's grace and holiness now by living holy lives, so as to bring praise to God's name, so as to declare the grace that God has shown to us.

And so let me ask you, do you have them as your personal goal in life? Is your goal to grow in grace and holiness? And what aspects of your life can you see which shows that to be true?

When we encourage one another, maybe it's a husband or wife or children or people in church, are these things that we help them to grow in? Do we pray that they will grow in grace and holiness in their lives?

And then when people see us as Christ's disciples, are the words gracious and holy the ones that they would use of us? I don't mean holy in the sense of goody two shoes, but holy in the sense of how quick we are to repent, how quick we are to turn from our pride or jealousy or bitterness, quick to admit our impatience, our hypocrisy, our harshness to others.

Be holy because the God who saved us, the God we love, the God we serve, is holy. Let's pray. Father, show us more and more of your grace and holiness so that we may marvel at your glory and majesty.

[25 : 03] Help us to see that more and more in your Son as we get to know him through your word.

May your spirit grow that same grace and holiness in our lives and among us as your people. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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