A Taste of Heaven

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] Well, if you would take your Bibles and turn back to Exodus chapter 24 on page 68, some commentators think that this is the most amazing passage in all the Bible and some commentators don't say anything about it.

They just think it's so amazing they pass over to the next chapter, which is not helpful for the preacher. This is the day when God brings some of his friends up on Mount Sinai and has a meal with them.
And for just a moment they are allowed up into heaven or perhaps better, heaven comes down to them. More importantly, the chapter tells us what God is really like, what he wants with us, what the purpose of life is.
So it's a tall order. You know the Westminster Catechism? It's one of the finest pieces of writing that came out of the English Reformation. The first question is, what is the chief end of man?
If we update that language, we ask what is the fundamental existential problem for humanity? Why are we here? And the answer is, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.
[1:25] It's pretty good, isn't it? Well, that's what this chapter is all about. And it is, we're in the second half of Exodus and it has been high drama.

God's taken his people out of this terrible slavery and oppression and he has rescued them through plagues and Passover and Red Sea. All, as we remember, is a rehearsal for the great salvation that's coming in Jesus.
And everything that God has been doing is so that he can bring his people to himself so that he will be with them. Do you remember that's why he revealed his name to them in the beginning?
The reason you give your name to someone is so that you will know them and God reveals, I am the I am, so that they might enjoy him and glorify him.
That's why he has rescued them with outstretched arm and mighty works so that he might dwell with them and they will be his people and he will be their God.
[2:28] And do you remember this scene on Mount Sinai which began back in chapter 19? And now in chapter 19, God brings his people to himself and he says, look, I brought you out like an eagle. I carried you on eagle's wings.

And then he says, I have brought you to myself. And now in chapter 24, he shows them why he's brought them to himself. The reason he is sharing himself with them is so that they might enter into his glory and live with him and be with him forever.
It's very important. You see, God is not some vague force. He's not a divine cloud of something or other out there in the universe.
He is our maker. His name is I am and he has made us for himself. And the way Christians usually speak about this or commonly speak about this is we talk about having an intimate personal relationship with God.
And there's something right about that. We don't want to impersonalise or depersonalise God. But there's something incredibly irritating about that phrase as well, isn't there?
[3:40] I mean, God's not my buddy. He's not my equal. It is because of his majestic and holy and powerful divinity that we find ourselves in him.

So our language stretches at this point. And I'll use the word relationship and ask two questions that I think this passage really answers. And the first is what kind of friendship, what kind of relationship does God want to have with us?
And secondly, how does God bring us into that friendship? Firstly then, the chapter tells us that it is a friendship of deep closeness.

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Everything in the chapter moves towards this. Look down at verse 1. The first command to Moses. God says, come up to the Lord.
You and Aaron and Aaron's boys and 70 of the elders. And when you go through this chapter, seven times there's this go up, go up, go up, go up. Because God can't come down or else he would consume them.
[4:49] But he keeps calling them to himself. And then after the sacrifices in verses 4 to 10, we come to these astounding words in verses 9 to 11.

If you just look down, I'll read them again. They're remarkable. Verse 9. Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and 70 of the elders of Israel went up and they saw the God of Israel.
There you have it.
Now, meals, eating meals with friends and family, as Dan has so thoroughly stolen my thunder in the children's focus, is one of the great delights in life.
Bronnie and I had the great fortune in 2006 to spend a couple of weeks in France, when my sister and her husband joined us. Her husband, Simon, is one of my closest friends, despite marrying my sister.
[6:06] It's just a secret between us. One of the meals that we had stays in my mind. We were staying in Provence and we heard about a restaurant where there was a local chef who used only local food, who cooked in his own home.

And on his deck, he would serve it to people who came and paid a certain amount of money. So we drove around the countryside and we found this house and it's in the middle of a vineyard on the top of a hill.
And we had a meal there with the sun going down with much laughter and much friendship and much food. And it was just great. It's one of my great memories from that trip.
But here the God of all the universe invites the leaders of his people, the people he's already rescued from the hardship of slavery, he invites them into his presence so that they might eat and drink together.
Isn't that amazing? Now we know, don't we, that no one can look at God and live. And to show how stunning this is, verse 11 simply says, God did not lay his hand on them.
[7:14] They beheld God and ate and drank. But we're not really told what they saw. The language becomes very modest and reserved here. We're not told anything of God's appearance.

We're only told something of his surroundings. Actually, we're only told something of his surroundings under his feet. There's this pure pavement as clear and as piercing and as translucent blue as the sky itself.
But even that is not directly described. It is, verse 10, as it were, a pavement, like the heavens for very cleaners. Somehow by his grace and power, God lets them in.
And he allows something of himself to be seen by human eyes and they eat and they drink with him. Isn't that amazing? And I think we don't go far enough as believers, do we?
We talk about and we emphasize the cross and our forgiveness in Jesus Christ, which is right. But forgiveness is not the end point. It's not the final point.
[8:22] We must not stop with forgiveness. Because forgiveness is meant to lead to feasting. The freedom that we have being freed from our sins is not just so that we would have a clean conscience and a happy life.

It's so that we might be able to sit down with God and enjoy his presence and eat in his company face to face. The freedom of forgiveness is meant to lead us into this deep and close and abiding friendship with God where we look at him and he shares with us.
And one of the things about eating meals with friends and having friendship is that there is mutual sharing and mutual truthfulness. Part of the great delights of friendship is that there is a real friend. You are secure in the acceptance of your friend and they speak the truth and you are able to share the truth with them as well. And I think that's why there is such a heavy emphasis on the words of God here in this chapter.
Now, I want to go for a little excursion at this point in the sermon. I'm just warning you of this. Preachers sometimes wander away from the text.
[9:38] Congregations sometimes wander off as well. It's more dangerous when the preacher does it if he doesn't know it. But I'm just telling you, I think it's important that we do this. Because have you noticed through the book of Exodus that God tells Moses to write his words down?

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And here in chapter 24 in verse 4, for a second time Moses writes, and then in verse 12, God calls Moses up the mountain again and gives him the Ten Commandments, he says, which I am going to write on a bit of rock with my finger.
And the reason I want to do this little excursion with you, because I think there are two very contemporary questions which are facing us right now. One is, how did we get the Bible anyway? I mean, isn't it like Chinese whispers?
You know, the message gets distorted the further away we get from it. And secondly, even if I can trust the text of the Bible, how is it still relevant to us today? Can't we just interpret it any way we like?
Can't deal with those questions in detail. But I just want to show you something. If you would turn to Exodus 32 for a moment, which is just a little bit right. Exodus 32 verse 16.
[10:52] It's part of the same scene on the mountain. In verse 16, Moses says this, and the tables were the work, these are the two rocks, the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.

So Moses comes down the mountain with these two tablets in his hands, and he says, this is God's work. The writing is actually God's writing. God himself wrote on the rocks with his finger so that we couldn't fiddle with them.
So they remain permanently etched on those rocks. And we know that God told Moses to write what he said and what he did so that all Israel would be careful to do what was written.
Now, this is the way of God with us, his people. One of the key parts of his friendship with us is that he ensures that his words and deeds are written.
Not just so that we would have a record which is historically accurate, but so that these words would function ongoingly, continually, as the authority of God.
[12:09] Let me say it this way. These words are the instrument of God's friendship with us by which he continues to tell us the truth and draw us close to himself.

And we are to read these words just as though we were on the mountain having the meal with the 70 others. Because the writings come to us like a love letter does.
And when you receive a love letter from someone who really loves you, you don't take the words of the letter and make them mean anything you want. There's an intention. God means what he says.
And throughout the Old Testament, whenever God's people turn away from God and follow other gods, they also turn away from his word. And whenever they turn back to God for renewal and revival, they also turn back to his word written.
So what is written, you see, it's not just a record of past generations and their struggle to understand God. It comes to us from the heart of God and one little part comes even from the finger of God.
[13:15] So it is that God continues to speak through his word to us today. I point out that's what Jesus believed. In every debate with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, what was the final court of appeal for Jesus?

It is written. And in his own life, with his own difficult decisions, what was the final court of appeal for Jesus? It is written. And when he's arguing with the Pharisees in the book of John, in the fifth chapter, he says to the Pharisees, If you do not believe Moses' writings, how will you believe my words?
In other words, in Jesus' mind, you can't take a different attitude to the writings of Moses than to his very own words. And that, of course, is what the Apostle Paul means in 2 Timothy when he says all scripture was inspired by God.
Literally, every writing was breathed out by God. And that is how God continues his friendship with us today. One more text.
One more little New Testament text and then we've finished our excursion. In the book of Hebrews, in the third chapter, the writer quotes the words from Psalm 95, written more than a thousand years before.
[14:34] And he says this. The writer says, Therefore, as the Holy Spirit, not said, but says, now in the present, and then he quotes Psalm 95, today when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

He's saying the Holy Spirit is the real author of Psalm 95 through King David, and that the Holy Spirit through those words speaks now, today, when you hear his voice, through the written words,

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do not harden your hearts.
And that is why the scriptures remain eternally relevant. It is through these words that the Holy Spirit inspired so long ago that God continues to speak and he continues to reveal himself in his friendship with us and to draw us to himself.
If you've drifted off, that's the end of the excursion. Let's go back to Mount Sinai. Anyway, the reason I point this out is in the same way with forgiveness, same is true for the words of God, we must not stop with the words.
The words are given by God to draw us deeper and deeper into this friendship with him. They're there to make us long for the great meal and the great supper at the end of the age where we will sit at table with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom of heaven.
[16:03] They are meant to strengthen us so that in the face of our enemies we can say he spreads a table before us. That day we look for when we'll enjoy the greatest, longest, most delicious feast in fellowship with one another and face to face with God.

That's what we're made for. And if there's any doubt, just look at the last three verses of Exodus 24. Moses goes up the mountain, the cloud of God's presence covers the mountain, the glory of God immerses Moses and the top of the mountain and in verse 17 we're told that the appearance of God's glory is like a devouring and a consuming fire but there's Moses up in there.
He's in the cloud, He's in the consuming fire for 40 days and 40 nights. So again, you see, the goal of our salvation is not just forgiveness, it's not just friendship with God, it's that we enter into His glory.
It's that we be covered by and permeated by the glory of God. That's the kind of friendship that God desires with us. And so the second question is how can it happen?
How does it happen? And the answer simply is the blood of the covenant. Now you'll notice I skipped over verses 4 to 9.
[17:34] How is it possible that these men can be in the presence of God eating and drinking without perishing? Well, it has to do with the blood of the covenant. If you cast your eyes over that, you'll see that before he goes up the mountain, Moses builds an altar just as God commanded, which is a symbol of God's presence and he puts the 12 pillars around as a kind of a little photograph of the people of God around him.

And then he takes one bull and he sacrifices it and burns it, incinerates it utterly on the altar, nothing left. And then he takes another bull and barbecues it so that it's then eatable and he takes the blood of the bull and he puts it into two halves and he takes half the blood and splashes it all over the altar and he takes the other half of the blood and splashes it over the people of Israel.
And he says in verse 8 as he's splashing them, Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. It's unhygienic, isn't it?
I mean, seriously, I mean, think about this. What is going on? Well, this is a covenant ceremony. God is sealing the covenant. When I left high school I worked for a year.
Part of that year I sold furniture in a company in Australia and we were paid a salary and on top of the salary we were paid in spivs.
[19:06] Now, I'd never heard the word and I asked the 9 o'clock congregation and they all pretended they'd heard it before but just imagine you've not heard that word it's an Australian word I think for strange commissions so that at the end of the week you'd get a salary line and you'd get a spiv line.

We all loved our spivs and talked about our spivs and the point of the illustration is that every business has its own words that you just can't translate which kind of lost its power and everyone said they'd heard the word but you understand what I'm saying?
Do you understand what I'm saying? Thank you. Well, covenant is one of those words. It's a very precious word to us who believe in God but there's nothing like it.
You can't, there's no perfect human illustration. I mean, it's a little bit like a marriage in a way. We speak of a marriage covenant because there's a mutual commitment of heart to one another but it's not like a marriage at all because God is not an equal partner with us.
He's made us and everything from begin to end is His grace and His initiative so it's very different from a marriage. Some people say it's like a contract because it's binding on both parties but a contract is a cold and legal term and it doesn't come close to reflecting the warmth that God has for us and the desire that through the covenant we'd come into friendship and into His embrace.

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[20:32] This is a covenant ceremony. You remember if you've been with us last year back in Genesis 15 when God made covenant with Abram cut animals in half he said put the carcasses on two sides walk through the covenant both parties walk right down the centre of the animals saying be it to me as these animals if I do not fulfil the covenant.

It's very dramatic. It means that this covenant is a covenant of life and death and it establishes a sacred relationship with God that lasts beyond this life.
But the sacrifices have a second meaning as well. Although God has rescued His people from Egypt they cannot yet stand before Him.
They cannot enter His glory as they are. God cannot live with them for one simple reason and it is their sin. We know that sin separates and we know from the book of Genesis that the wages of sin is death and that the only way that God can bring us into His presence is if our sins are covered. The only way for them to be covered is through death. If you are to have a relationship with God someone has to die for your sins.
[21:57] You cannot enter His glory as you are. That's why Moses splashes the blood in two directions. He splashes it on the altar so that God's holiness and righteousness are satisfied and then he splashes it on the people as a massive action of grace and covering and terrible dreadful reminder to show that they are forgiven because the blood is a very graphic illustration of death.

It's not blood in me which is life it's blood shed poured out and it shows something of what it takes for God to bring us into His presence and something of His determination to have us in His presence.
It's a graphic picture of the searching purity and seriousness of God's glory and we've seen this haven't we? We saw it in the Passover lamb we see it in the Old Testament sacrifices and we know of course it points to the day when the Son of God Himself pours out His blood for us and on the night before He was on the night before He was crucified He says this He takes the cup and He says drink of it all of you this is my blood of the covenant these words except my He inserts this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins then He says I tell you you shall not drink again of the fruit I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom He's thinking about the meal and in saying so Jesus fulfills every Old Testament sacrifice and He opens a new covenant not just with any blood but with my blood
He says it's the blood of God and He gives us a glimpse of why He's doing it by saying I'm really longing for the day when I'm going to sit down with you and eat and drink of the fruit of the vine in the kingdom of God this is what we were made for to glorify God to enjoy Him forever and this is the way that has been opened for us it is through the blood of the covenant and if you do not enter in it doesn't make any difference to you whatsoever you have to enter in Jesus shows how determined God is to open the way to draw us close to Himself it's not cheap grace it's not the cheap grace of tolerance and approval it's the costly costly deadly grace of sacrifice and redemption God sends His Son and when we enter Him He makes us holy and He begins to transform us as we turn to Him in repentance and faith and covenant brothers and sisters means that bond of love between us and God and it is strong and it is secure it is stronger than anything else in your life and in mine it's stronger than any suffering you and I are facing it's stronger than sin it's stronger than death itself and all of us who enter that covenant know the security of God's love we know that we weren't made for all those things we keep hearing about our popularity and our success that we were made for this to enjoy this divine friendship that He's given
His blood so that we might enter in and John Stott says that sermons are meant to be hors d'oeuvres they're not meant to be the main meal that you're meant to go away and think about this and read and pray about it and if you want to think on some application you may be interested later on in the day to look up Hebrews chapter 10 which gives four applications from the blood of Jesus opening the way for us it says I'll just mention this it says don't look at it now he says since we have confidence to enter the most holy place that's where God is through the blood of Jesus first let's draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us so the first application is draw near draw near every day every hour all the time draw near to him second hold unswervingly to the hope we profess speak about it with others thirdly let us consider how to spur one another to love and to good deeds the people around you the people in your small groups think about how to spur them to love and to good deeds and fourthly do not give up meeting together as is the habit of some come to church and let us encourage one another

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and all the more as you see the day approaching isn't that great let's bow our heads as Irena comes up to lead us in prayer
[27:05] I want to pray let's let's let's kneel for prayer big let's let's like let's tell you

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