

The God of the Covenant

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[0 : 00] Now there's a remarkable scene at the beginning of one of my favorite books, one of the Chronicles of Narnia books, and that is the book The Silver Chair. And in this scene, there is a young girl whose name is Jill, and she is in this enchanted forest, and she has not had anything to drink.

She's driven nearly mad by thirst, and she hears a stream trickling off in the distance, and so she follows her ears to find this source of water, and she sees the stream, only to find that there is a great lion that is waiting for her at the stream.

A great lion. And this lion, Aslan, he speaks to her, and he says, If you are thirsty, come and drink. And then Jill asks the lion, Will you promise not to do anything to me if I come?

You know, terrified, of course, that the lion is going to do as lions tend to do, which is eat people. And the lion replies, very reassuringly, he replies, I make no promise.

And so she tries again, you know, gives it another shot, and she asks him specifically, Do you eat girls? And here's what he replies to her.

[1 : 19] I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms. And that's when Jill learns this terrifying lesson, that the source of life, that source of true life, that stream, that living water, it's found only by coming face to face with fearsome majesty, with a majestic presence that can destroy you if he chooses, and has the right to do so.

This fearsome presence who grants you life, but he doesn't grant you life out of any obligation on his part. He does it only by an unexplainable kindness and grace.

And it's this sovereign presence, this presence of the Lord. That's what Moses, that's what the leaders of Israel are called to approach. Here in the Old Testament book of Exodus, in chapter 24, in the text that we read at the beginning of our worship service.

So in Exodus chapter 24, over this year, we've been looking through the book of Exodus. We've been proceeding step by step through this book, and we've seen God rescue his people Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt.

And he has revealed that God is great. And we've seen this God sustain his people in the wilderness of Sinai, giving them right and wise laws.

[2 : 48] He's revealed to them that God is good. And now this great and good God is beckoning the people of Israel. He's calling them to himself to seal a new relationship with him.

He's beginning to reveal to them that not only God is great, God is good, but also God is with us. But having God with us, having God in all of his greatness, that is an utterly terrifying experience.

And we've seen the Lord lead his people out of Egypt, this land that he had struck with many plagues, this land in which he had overpowered this ancient superpower. And he's led his people out of the land in this towering pillar of fire and smoke.

And then on Mount Sinai, we've seen the great power of God revealed. And we see it again in Exodus chapter 24, verse 17 here. The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

Now the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews, in Hebrews chapter 12, he describes this encounter as This fearsome, terrifying experience, this dangerous encounter with God as he really is in all of his greatness.

[4 : 32] We've learned over the last few months, there is not a one of us, not a one of us who is worthy to come near to this God. As we learned in the journey class this morning, no one is good but God alone.

No one is truly good, uncorrupted by evil. We're all guilty of disobedience towards his 10 commandments that we've been studying over the course of this summer. We're all guilty of failing to love God as we ought to do.

We're all guilty of failing to love our neighbor as we ought to love them. We stand condemned of this sin before the Almighty God. And yet, despite this danger, the first thing that we learn from Exodus chapter 24 is this.

The Lord calls his people to approach him. The Lord calls his people to approach him. Here's the problem. Here's what makes this so hard.

God is good. And whatever has been corrupted by sin cannot be allowed into his good and perfect presence.

[5 : 44] God is great in his goodness. He's not just a little bit good. He is perfectly good. So if God is good and God is great, that raises the question, how can God be with us?

How can he be anywhere near us? How can the Lord call his people to approach him when we are not worthy to come anywhere near him? And the Lord's answer is given at the beginning of chapter 24, verses 1 and 2.

And here's what the Lord tells Moses. Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.

Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. And so the Lord's answer is, he isn't going to say, you know, everybody come on up to the mountain, bring the whole mob, bring the whole family with you.

He doesn't invite the whole nation of Israel up to barge into his presence like a rabble, right? His answer is, you know, I'm going to select a specific party of leaders to represent the people. They'll come up the mountain, but they're going to stand at a distance.

[6 : 53] Moses alone shall come near to the Lord. So the Lord calls his people to approach him, but the only one who can truly come near to him is his chosen mediator, his go-between, someone who can represent him before the people of Israel, someone who can represent the people of Israel before the Lord.

And on Mount Sinai, Moses is the mediator between God and man. But there's limits here. Moses is just a human being, just like you and me, and that's all he is.

He's going to be flawed. He's going to be imperfect in the way that he represents God. Moses is going to limit the people's relationship with the Lord their God. He's a very limited mediator.

But you and I have good news. We've got better news. Because the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2, that now you and I, we have a better mediator than Moses ever was.

Because he writes, there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men. The man Jesus Christ. What makes Jesus a better mediator than Moses is this.

[8 : 11] Jesus is God the Son. God is a trinity. One God in three persons. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God the Son.

He is fully God. And in John chapter 1, we read about Jesus. The law was given through Moses. Jesus, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

This is key. No one has ever seen God. But, the only God who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known. And that's what makes Jesus the perfect mediator.

John calls Him the only God who is at the Father's side. Jesus is God the Son, which means that He is fully and completely God, just as God the Father is. Jesus fully knows.

Jesus fully understands the one and only God, because He is God. And Jesus fully knows.

[9 : 12] Jesus fully understands you and me, because Jesus is fully and completely human, just like we are. He is the perfect mediator.

The Lord calls His people to approach Him, and Jesus is that one mediator who allows us to approach God the Father. Without Jesus, no one is worthy to stand before God.

We would all be destroyed because of that unloving, law-breaking, sinful corruption that's woven through every one of us. And if you don't believe me, go on our website, listen to the sermons on the Ten Commandments.

We don't have what it takes. When we're exposed for what we are underneath. But Jesus can stand, and Jesus can approach where you and I never could.

Jesus can speak to the Father on our behalf, and through Jesus, we can approach Him. The Lord calls His people to approach Him, and we have a better mediator before God than Moses ever was.

[10 : 14] And so this coming of a newer and better mediator means that you and I have a newer and better relationship with God than Moses ever could offer to the people of Israel.

And that's an amazing thing because through Moses, God had forged what truly is a remarkable relationship with the people of Israel. And in Exodus 24, we see that.

He calls this relationship a covenant. A covenant. Now I found a helpful short definition of a covenant. It's an agreement between two or more parties outlining mutual rights and responsibilities.

Doesn't that roll off the tongue? An agreement between two or more parties outlining mutual rights and responsibilities. Now that, you know, makes it sound like some sort of impersonal contract or a business arrangement, something you'd write up between business parties.

But a covenant is really a lot more personal than that. A covenant binds people together. It binds people together in a relationship of loyalty and honor.

[11 : 18] It's so much more than just an official legal arrangement. It's that, but it's much more. It's a well-defined, well-communicated relationship.

Now in our culture, we don't form covenants very often, but we're not completely unfamiliar with them because there's a common example. That's the marriage covenant. A marriage covenant in which a husband and a wife bind themselves together in an oath of loyalty.

They outline their responsibilities to one another. They speak vows of loyal love to one another. They commit their relationship in writing before God and man through a marriage registration.

And just like this modern form of a covenant, the covenant that God is forming with his people is a relationship that is expressed through words that are spoken and words that are written. In verse 3, we see words spoken by the Lord through his mediator.

And then we see words spoken in response by the people. Verse 3, Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, all the words that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

[12 : 30] So we have these spoken words that shape the covenant. And then we have written words that accompany them. Verse 4, Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord.

And then in verse 12, the Lord said to Moses, come up to me on the mountain and wait there that I may give you the tablets of stone with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction.

So we have this covenant and the substance of this covenant is formed, is shaped through words that are spoken and words that are written. That's the relationship.

And now the problem that we're going to encounter is this. This first covenant runs no deeper than words. It runs no deeper than words spoken or written. It doesn't get to the hearts of the people of Israel.

It doesn't penetrate down to the very core of their beings because they eagerly speak their vows. They're like these young and eager lovers who've met, you know, a week before and now they're in a Vegas wedding, right?

[13 : 33] That's what this is like. They're just all excited but it doesn't really run deep. They'll quickly abandon their covenant commitments whenever they doubt that God is great, God is good, God is with us.

This covenant is all external. It's just verbal. It doesn't change who they are on the inside. But we have a new and better mediator, Jesus Christ and through him God has given us a new and better covenant.

And the words of this covenant are not merely what we read, the law and the commandment written on tablets of stone. In 2 Corinthians chapter 3 in verse that Chris referenced earlier in this service, the apostle Paul, he encourages the church that he planted, he reminds them that he and his missionary team that they told them, brought them news of a better covenant.

Here's what Paul says to them. You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, not written with ink but with the spirit of the living God.

Not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

[14 : 51] not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything is coming from us but our sufficiency is from God who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit.

For the letter kills but the spirit gives life. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ God's love and the spirit is the spirit of God.

Paul is absolutely, utterly confident that Jesus Christ is the mediator of a new and better covenant. He brings a new and better relationship with God and one aspect that makes this relationship so much better is that it's no longer confined to words that are cut into tablets of stone.

This new relationship is written on tablets of human hearts. If you believe in Jesus Christ as your mediator before God then this covenant relationship with God is cut into your very soul into the very core of your being your thoughts your attitudes your feelings deep down you belong to God and he belongs to you.

The God who is great and the God who is good he is now the God who is with us. He's with us because God the Holy Spirit is living in you and in me he's giving us life he's giving us all the resources and the relationships that we need to remain faithful to this new covenant relationship with God.

[16 : 41] this covenant is made even more secure because it is sealed the covenant needs to be sealed and it's sealed with a better sign and seal than the first covenant ever had.

Now to understand that we have to understand that the first covenant that we read about in Exodus chapter 24 it followed a common pattern of how covenants were formed in the ancient world in the ancient near east covenants were a common thing and they would be sealed they would be sealed actually by taking an animal using it as a sacrifice killing it cutting it into pieces you know I guess Peter wasn't around to put a stop to that at that time the meat would then be taken it would be eaten as a covenant meal the covenant parties would then walk between the pieces together or they could do this they could take the approach that Moses took in Exodus chapter 24 verses 5 through 8 imagine being the people of Israel in this scenario here he sent young men of the people of Israel who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord and Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins half of the blood he threw against the altar then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people and they said all that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient here's the fun part

Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and he said behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words now I know a lot of weddings have featured things like unity candles unity sands powerpoint slideshows other fun little rituals I think this blood thing sounds pretty interesting there's promise here next so next wedding I officiate we're not gonna you know we'll have that receiving line you know you can't throw rice because the birds are gonna eat it and blow up I guess so you know people now do things like blowing bubbles at the bride and the groom you know what this sounds a lot more interesting so I say let's slaughter a goat hand out vials of blood to the wedding guests and just splash it on the bride and groom as they walk by so there we go the next devil in wedding I officiate is that's what we're doing alright I'm getting you know what this might actually happen that's kind of scaring me alright so we have to ask why would they do this right this seems you know maybe to someone in our modern culture this seems primitive or barbaric but there is a rationale to it right this isn't done just because people like splashing blood all over the place there were two purposes for sealing a covenant this way first of all well frankly it gave you a meal right you've got food for a covenant meal and we'll talk about that in a moment how that was significant but second what this did either you know walking between pieces of an animal or splashing the blood of an animal on the covenant parties this communicated the penalty for breaking the covenant this is a blood oath this is serious it's a covenant relationship that cost an animal its life it's a relationship that binds and intertwines the life of both parties this covenant relationship is a serious serious business right so if you're you know the kind of person you're commitment phobic this probably isn't sort of the thing for you because to break the covenant was to be worthy of the death that the animal suffered it's saying if this if I break this covenant may what happen to this animal happen to me it's this covenant this loyal lifelong all in commitment that's the relationship that the Lord wanted with his people in the journey class we encountered a gentleman who's known as the rich young ruler who approaches

Jesus Christ and he asks him teacher what must I good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life and it becomes clear pretty quickly that he just wants Jesus to give him a list of things to do but when Jesus says you've got to give up all your money come and follow me a whole lifestyle shift a radical allegiance to Jesus Christ that's not what he was looking for he wasn't looking for that personal relationship he wanted the arm's length good teacher you give me some advice and then I'll add this to the course of the life I already live but the relationship God wants with his people is a life transforming covenant relationship the Lord calls his people to approach him in a covenant sealed with blood a covenant sealed with blood but as we've learned this covenant sealed in blood or not it wasn't written on the hearts of the people of Israel their hearts were not changed so they're prone to wander they're inclined to abandon their commitment to the Lord they're quick to break their part of the covenant they're quick to form unfaithful competing relationships with other gods and so according to the terms of the covenant that they've formed they deserved death they deserved destruction for their betrayal of the God who had given himself to them all in as their covenant partner but this is what makes our new and better covenant so amazing so remarkable because that old covenant that foreshadowed the new covenant it's just a shadow of the new covenant that's coming this new covenant that was sealed not with the blood of oxen but with the blood of Jesus Christ again in the New Testament book of Hebrews in chapter 9 here's what we read if the blood of goats and bulls sanctify if they make a person holy for the purification of the flesh how much more will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God how much more will it purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God therefore he that's Jesus Christ therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions from the sins committed under the first covenant not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood for when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people saying this is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you under the law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins so the old covenant that was made through a mediator through Moses it was inaugurated it was sealed with the blood of bulls what his purpose was it was given to prepare the way for a new and better covenant through our mediator

Jesus Christ inaugurated and sealed with his own blood he shed this blood when he died 2,000 years ago on a Roman cross voluntarily giving up his life for us that old covenant all it did for us all it did was bring condemnation to sinful people like you and me it brought condemnation because we are too powerless we are too corrupted to keep it perfectly all those broken bodies all that blood of the sacrificial animal all that did was remind God's people that this was the penalty for those who betrayed their relationship with him but the new covenant it brings life to us because what our mediator did is he became our sacrifice

[25 : 22] Jesus our Lord has died on our behalf he is God's gift to us he has endured the punishment for the sins of everybody who believes in him it was for our sake it was his body it was his body that was broken and for our sake it was his blood that was shed Jesus has already paid the penalty in full for our unfaithfulness and he did it right at the outset of our new relationship with God that was the foundation for our new relationship with God it begins with grace so now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus and so we are welcomed we are welcomed into the presence of God our Father we can approach him we can come to him welcomed as his own sons welcomed as his own daughters because his own dearly loved son has taken our sin on himself he fulfilled our covenant obligations to

God on our behalf we are welcomed and we are loved and so Jesus has done this for us he's become the sacrifice and the mediator of a new covenant in Hebrews chapter 10 we read therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus that's where our confidence comes from not because we have what it takes we don't but Jesus does and we enter by his blood by the blood of Jesus let us draw near let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean that's the blood sprinkled our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water your conscience your conscience which once condemned you because you knew you were guilty your conscience can now be made clear free from guilt what would your life be like if you were freed from guilt freed from condemnation because you have been sprinkled with the blood of

Jesus Christ your Lord the body of Christ was broken for you his blood was shed for you and so now we are beckoned come we are being urged step forward with confidence enter the holy presence of God you are being urged to come forward to draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith we are confident because we trust that Jesus' blood is enough it's enough to satisfy the God of the covenant the Lord calls his people to approach him in a covenant sealed with blood the blood of Jesus our Lord and so we are called to this new covenant relationship with God it's a relationship in which we do fear the living God in which we do tremble in his solemn presence just like

C.S. Lewis portrayed a girl named Jill trembling before the presence of a mighty lion he would not be God if we did not tremble when we came before him that's what makes him so satisfying because God is great but we don't tremble in misery we don't tremble in suffering we tremble with a fearsome joy because the Lord calls his people to approach him in a covenant sealed with blood so that we may enjoy his presence forever so that we may enjoy his presence forever in that first covenant we read in Exodus chapter 24 verses 9 through 11 then Moses and Aaron Nadab and Abihu and 70 of the elders of Israel went up and they saw the God of Israel there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone like the very heaven for clearness and he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel they beheld

God and ate and drank they saw the God of Israel they beheld God so these men experienced that fearsome joy of beholding God of seeing with their own eyes the God who is great the God who is good now of course when we hear that we're all we're all immediately can have two questions on our mind maybe more but the first one here's the one we're all secretly wanting to know what did he look like what did God look like what did you see and here's how Moses and the elders saw him in verse 10 there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone like the very heaven for clearness boom question answered now if someone asked you you know what did you know if someone asked you you know what does your friend look like and you said well he stands on a carpet and the carpet is sort of grayish looking does that answer your question not exactly so why are we told this only why is our question not answered what does he look like our question isn't answered because there can be no answer to this question whatever it was they looked at they knew that was the

[31 : 29] Lord but they couldn't begin to understand it they couldn't comprehend what they were seeing you know their description basically amounts to well he was you know standing on some sort of platform like thing and I guess it looked like a pavement made out of sapphire but not really that's as far as their words take them they knew they were looking at the Lord God himself but their vision was clouded it was hazy it was obscured and that answers our second question the second question is this why didn't they die because the Lord later on says to Moses in Exodus chapter 33 you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live what that tells us is that they were not seeing God face to face they were not viewing his glory and its fullness they were not seeing it distinctly and clearly that's how they were able to see the God of Israel and live because they weren't really seeing him very clearly and also in verse 11 we read that the

Lord did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel so this tells us what the attitude the Lord had towards them it was an attitude of mercy he was there not to destroy them but to welcome them to welcome them into his presence not only to behold the Lord not only to see him but also to feast with him they beheld God and ate and drank now we love having meals in our culture big family meals where you invite everyone together to have dinner in the ancient world they loved that even more but the thing is you would eat meals together only with those that you considered family and friends and welcome guests you would never eat a meal with someone who was your enemy you would never eat a meal with someone you viewed as defiled or shameful that's not how things worked in the ancient near east and in most traditional cultures but here the Lord welcomes the representative leaders of

Israel he welcomes them to a covenant feast in his presence on the mountain of the Lord the Lord calls his people to approach him in a covenant sealed with blood so that we may enjoy his presence forever this is just a taste remember all that's going on in Exodus chapter 24 is just a taste of something better that's going to come this is just a taste of the feast that is going to come for the people of God this is just a prelude to something that is so much better that the Lord has planned for you and for me because the Lord is going to welcome to his table he's going to welcome not just the people of Israel he's going to extend his welcome in a new and better covenant he is going to throw a party and the whole world is invited the whole world is invited to come to come and to believe in his son and to be welcomed into his joyful presence to feast with the

God who is great the God who is good the God who is with us and the prophet Isaiah he looks forward and he sees this new covenant feast that is coming and in Isaiah chapter 25 here's what he writes oh Lord you are my God I will exalt you I will praise your name for you have done wonderful things plans formed of old faithful and sure on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food a feast of well aged wine of rich food full of marrow of aged wine well refined and he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples the veil that is spread over all nations he will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth for the

Lord has spoken it will be said on that day behold this is our God we have waited for him that he might save us this is the Lord we have waited for him let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation this is the good life this is the true life when those many many years of longing and waiting and weeping have passed and we long for the Lord to set all things right in this crooked and twisted world one day you and I we will stand before the Lord and on that day we will say together this is the Lord we have waited for him let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation that is the joy of the new covenant that is the joy of our new relationship with the

[37 : 03] God of the covenant the God who is great the God who is good the God who is with us and we can know this God because we have a better mediator than Moses Moses saw God only in a cloudy and hazy manner Moses couldn't comprehend who he was seeing but we have a better mediator we have someone who beholds God who sees God who comprehends him fully who knows him in all of his greatness and goodness Jesus the son of God he can do this because he himself is God he comes from God we read before in John chapter one about Jesus Jesus whom John calls the word of God the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth for from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace for the law was given through

Moses grace and truth came through Jesus Christ no one has ever seen God the only God who is at the father's side he has made him known Jesus has made God our father known to us in a way that Moses never could because Jesus is at the father's side he has seen God the father and when you and I see Jesus Christ for who he is when you and I believe in him as the son of God that we come to know God too we come to know the father too and for this reason Jesus became a man he became a human being just like you and me only perfect and without sin and Jesus prepared himself to be crucified he prepared himself to be the covenant sacrifice to take away the sin of the world and as he was doing that

Jesus ate one last meal with his disciples in Matthew chapter 26 now as they were eating Jesus took bread and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples and said take eat this is my body and he took a cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying drink of it all of you for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day until that day when I drink it new with you in my father's kingdom and so Jesus Christ he has risen to new life and we are waiting for him we are waiting for him to save us to return and restore all things in this world to the way they should be the

Lord calls his people to approach him in a covenant sealed with blood so that we may enjoy his presence forever and on that day when he returns when Jesus returns we will feast with him that's going to be the greatest Thanksgiving feast of all and we will tell of the great things he has done so now how do we talk about this and not celebrate communion together how do we do