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*Here
Is Our
God*

GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF IN SCRIPTURE

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On the Mountain

THE TERRIFYING AND BECKONING GOD

Exodus 19

TIM KELLER

Since I was the first plenary speaker, I should say something about the gathering itself. We gathered to connect women who hear and do Bible exposition. TGC did not bring women together to talk and think about women but to talk and think about God. Every culture of the world by God's common grace has its peculiar glories and tends to be attentive to and aware of things in Scripture that at least some of the other cultures don't see. They bring their various exegetical riches and theological understanding of the infallible Word of God to the whole church, and that enriches the whole church. That must also be true of both genders. For women to come together to hear and do Bible exposition certainly enriches all of those gathered, and it will enrich the whole church.

We're considering together the theme "Here Is Our God," looking into passages where God reveals himself in spectacular ways to his people. Exodus 19 is a great place to start. It's an important chapter, so important that several key New Testament texts refer directly to it (e.g., Hebrews 12 and 1 Peter 2). In Exodus 19, Moses and Israel come to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Chapter 19 does not contain the Ten Commandments, but it sets them up. The passage divides into three basic sections:

- 1) The History and Order of Grace (19:1–8)
- 2) The Terrifying and Beckoning God (19:9–19)
- 3) The Going Down of Moses (19:20–25)

1) THE HISTORY AND ORDER OF GRACE (EX. 19:1–8)

The History of Grace

The first couple of verses tell us something about the history of grace. Alec Motyer makes a good observation concerning these first two verses.¹ You wouldn't think of this unless you were a biblical scholar who keeps a map in his head as he is reading. He says that God and Moses basically told the Israelites, "Trust us. We're going to take you to the Promised Land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to Palestine." And the children of Israel trusted them. But Sinai is farther away from the Promised Land than Egypt. Sinai is actually south. So God led them almost in the opposite direction from where he said he was going to lead them. They were supposed to go

¹J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 190–92. This is a tremendous book. You couldn't do any better at understanding the book of Exodus, which is a long and very complicated book.

to a land flowing with milk and honey, yet God took them to a desert, a mountainous desert (v. 2). The land was far worse than Egypt. And that's where God met them.

It is often so: you give your life to Jesus and say, "I'm putting everything into your hands. I'm trusting you with my whole life." And then you watch things go downhill from there. Weeks later, months later, a couple of years later, you ask, "What happened? I gave myself to him. I trusted him. And everything is getting worse and worse." If you admit it, you are farther away from the things you had hoped God would give you. You think, "I gave God everything. Surely he'd give me this and this and this. You know, if he wants to." God seems to be taking you in an opposite direction. So often the history of grace in our lives follows this pattern: God seems to be taking us away from where he said he is going to take us. My two favorite penultimate examples of this pattern both happened at Dothan.

Example 1. The book of Genesis records that Jacob had twelve sons. Because he loved his wife Rachel more than his other wife, Leah, Jacob favored Rachel's sons over all the others. That utterly poisoned everything and everybody in that family. This was a case of overt parental favoritism. It poisoned the life of Joseph, who was one of Rachel's two sons. All the pieces were in place for Joseph to become spoiled and arrogant even though he was only a teenager. He could have been on his way to being an absolutely cruel, awful person. Their whole family system was broken, suffering the effects of selfishness and sin. The other brothers were bitter and cynical: they had a love-hate relationship with their father, and they were angry at Joseph and Benjamin. It was a mess. One

day, in the area of Dothan, far away from home, the brothers who were out shepherding saw Joseph come to them. They threw him in a pit and sold him into slavery in Egypt. And there it was, you might say, that Joseph turned to the God of his father: in the pit, on the trip, and in the dungeon where he ended up in Egypt and pled, “Get me out of here!”

Silence. Many years of silence.

Example 2. Something happened in Dothan years later. The prophet Elisha and his servant were locked up in the besieged city of Dothan (2 Kings 6). Elisha’s servant panicked, thinking that they were going to lose their lives. Elisha prayed. Then the eyes of Elisha’s servant were opened, and they both could see chariots of fire all around the city. God delivered Elisha and his servant dramatically from this besieged city.

That’s the way it’s supposed to be!

One guy prayed and prayed and nothing happened for years and years. God never seemed to answer his prayers. Another guy prayed and saw chariots of fire.

Now, when we get to the end of the book of Genesis and the end of Joseph’s story, we see that God’s grace was as operative in Joseph’s life as it was in Elisha’s life. But here’s the difference: Elisha’s immediate need was a fairly simple kind of salvation. He needed help from an army. But Joseph and Jacob and all those guys needed something way deeper. They needed their souls saved.

What if God had just showed up to Joseph early on and said something like this: “You are a spoiled brat. Do you realize that if you keep going the way you are, as self-centered as you are, you’re going to destroy your life, and nobody’s going to like you? You’re going to make a mess of your marriage.”

Have you ever tried to do that with a teenager? He won't listen to you.

John Newton, the great hymn writer, wrote in a letter, "Nobody ever learned they were a sinner by being told. They have to be shown." It took years for God to break open Joseph and his brothers and his father to grace. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20).²

Joseph's descendants, who grew into a great people, got to the Promised Land through the desert. They were looking for the Promised Land, but God took them to the desert. In the desert he would meet them. The desert was the way to the Promised Land.

The ultimate example of this pattern is Jesus. He shows up and preaches the kingdom of God. Think of his followers responding, "Yes! The kingdom of God! Lion lying down with the lamb! Every tear wiped away! Yeah!" The next thing you know, Jesus is on the cross, dying in agony. Imagine some of Jesus's followers looking up at him and thinking, "I don't know what good God could bring out of this." We know, of course, that the way to get to the resurrection is through the cross. The way to get to the ultimate resurrection (the new heavens and the new earth) is through the cross, through Jesus's going through that desert, loneliness, and suffering. If Jesus wants to come back and end evil and put everything right without ending us, then he had to go to the cross. Again, the way to the Promised Land is through the desert.

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So often that is how grace works. Are you ready for that?

John Newton said, “Everything is needful that he sends. Nothing can be needful that he withholds.” Think about that for the rest of your life. It’ll do you good.

The Order of Grace

Alec Motyer sees three things in Exodus 19:4–6.³ The sequence of these central elements is extremely important for understanding the whole Bible:

- 1) The saving acts of the Lord (v. 4)
- 2) Our response of obedience (v. 5a)
- 3) The blessing that the obedience brings (vv. 5b–6)

Motyer says that nothing must ever be allowed to upset this order: (1) salvation by grace, (2) obedience, (3) blessing. Nothing in your mind must ever upset that sequence. That’s the order.

To put it another way, God did not appear and give the children of Israel the law and then have them promise, “We will do everything the Lord says,” and then reply, “Good. I’ll save you. I’ll take you out of Egypt on eagles’ wings.” No, God just saves them.

Do you know what it means to be carried on eagles’ wings (v. 4)? Israel didn’t fight their way out of Egypt. They didn’t even run out or walk out in this sense (of course, they literally did). What God is trying to get across is that when an eagle carries you, you don’t do anything. You are lifted up and moved from one place to another. It’s sheer grace. It has nothing at all to do with your performance.

So God saves you by sheer grace and then says, “Because I

³Motyer, *Exodus*, 196.

saved you by sheer grace, obey me.” He does not say, “Obey me, and I’ll save you.” No, it’s, “I’ve saved you; now obey me.”

Motyer adds that the whole narrative from the Passover to the exodus to Mount Sinai is “a huge visual aid before our eyes.”⁴ It’s a visual aid. Of what? Of the gospel!

An Israelite could have said this:

I was in bondage under penalty of death. I was a slave in a foreign land. But I took shelter under the blood of the lamb. And I was led out and saved by the mighty arm of God. I did nothing at all to accomplish it. The Lord did it all for us his people. He saved us by his sheer grace. Then we came to the place where God showed us how to begin to live out our salvation. He gave us the law. And now we haven’t reached the Promised Land yet, and we often fail and fall; we certainly aren’t perfect. But we even have a way of constantly dealing with our sins through the atoning sacrifice, through the blood. And we’ll eventually get to the Promised Land.

That’s what an Israelite could have said during this period of time. And a Christian can say every one of those things, too.

Alec Motyer is absolutely right. This story is the most astounding visual aid. It’s the gospel writ large. You’ll never understand the whole Bible unless you understand the order: (1) grace, (2) obedience, (3) blessing. It’s not (1) grace, (2) blessing, (3) obedience. Nor is it (1) obedience, (2) grace, (3) blessing.

If it was law then deliverance, we would say, “You obey; therefore God accepts you.” But since it’s deliverance (the exodus) and then law (the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai),

⁴Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 39–40.

the gospel is this: “God accepts you; therefore, you obey.” A Christian says, “I’m accepted because of the blood of Jesus Christ; therefore, I obey.” There is nothing more important to understand.

Superficially, a person who operates under “I obey; therefore, God accepts me,” and a person who operates under “God accepts me; therefore, I obey” are probably both trying to obey the Ten Commandments. On the surface they are both trying to obey. But the person who understands the gospel, who understands this sequence, will be motivated by love, joy, and gratitude. The other person is operating out of fear. It is self-centered to say, “If I obey, then God will bless me and answer my prayers and take me to heaven.” Why does such a person obey God? To get things. But a person who already has everything in Jesus obeys not to get things from God but to *get God*, to please, resemble, love, delight in, and honor him. Those are utterly different inner dynamics.

The obedience of a person who says, “I’d better obey so that God will deliver me” is always conditional. This person thinks, “I’m really pretty good. I’ve been doing everything I should. I’ve been praying and reading my Bible. I’ve been exercising sexual self-control. I’ve been charitable to the poor. And my life isn’t going very well. But *she’s* not doing any of those things, and *her* life *is* going very well. What’s going on?!” If you ever feel like that, then you’ve probably got the sequence wrong. You might get an A in your Exodus exam, but you don’t get what the story of Exodus means. If it’s true that you obey because you’ve already been accepted, then what would the conditions be? You’re saying, “I’m doing this because of what I’ve already received from him.”

God says, “I saved you. Now obey me, and then these blessings will come.” And God names blessings (vv. 5b–6). God doesn’t say, “I want to make my covenant with you.” He says, “I want you to keep my covenant.” The hint is that God is saying, “I’ve already brought you into a relationship with me. Now I want to make it formal.” In other words, the blessings are there for you; they are yours in principle because God has saved you by his grace; but it’s through obedience that you’ll actually realize them.

What are those blessings?

- 1) “You will be my treasured possession.”
- 2) “You will be for me a kingdom of priests.”
- 3) “You will be for me . . . a holy nation.”

1) “You will be my treasured possession.” “Treasured possession” refers to the personal wealth of an ancient king. In those days kings were absolute monarchs, which meant that they essentially owned everything. If you were the king of a land, practically speaking you owned everything in the land. But this word refers to one’s private, personal wealth or possessions, something that you love so much that you put it in your room as your own personal delight. On the one hand, God already treasured Israel, or he wouldn’t have saved them. On the other hand, God says, “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” That’s why Motyer is right in saying that God is already treating Israel as a treasured possession, as a jewel. Yet God is saying, “I want you to obey into that kind of relationship. I want you to obey so that we can treasure each other.”

Think of how obedience works in a relationship like that.

If you fall in love with someone, you try to find out what pleases that person, what delights that person, what that person likes. Then you want to surprise that person by giving it or doing it. You might not think of it this way or use this term, but you are seeking the will of the beloved when you do that. You are trying to find out your beloved's will, what your beloved wants. And you are complying. You are essentially obeying your beloved's will. Why? Because you want to delight your beloved.

Some years ago in some lectures on legalism and antinomianism Sinclair Ferguson explained the gospel this way: "God accepts you; therefore, you obey." Legalism is, "You obey; therefore, God accepts you." Antinomianism is, "You really don't have to obey. Either there is no God, or God accepts you no matter how you live. He loves and accepts everybody."⁵ Sinclair argued that most of us tend to think of legalism and antinomianism as opposites, but they are actually the same: they both oppose the gospel because neither understands the grace of obedience. Most antinomians are ex-legalists who are broken under the fact that they could never understand *why* we must obey, that is, to treasure our treasure, to be treasured by our treasure. It's a love relationship.

But that's not all.

2) "You will be for me a kingdom of priests." A priest has access to God, but, in particular, priests are mediators. They bring people together. Priests bring people who are outside into a connection with God on the inside. If we have a relationship of love in which we are God's treasured possession,

⁵Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Marrow Controversy," sermon (2004), <http://www.sermonaudio.com/gpts>.

not only will others see and desire that love, but also we will be able as God's people to bring other people in, to show them the way to come into relationship with the God who made them. We get to be a whole kingdom of priests.

But that's not all.

3) "You will be for me . . . a holy nation." *A holy nation* literally means "a different kind of human society." *Holy* means "separate, distinct." God is saying, "I want you to obey so that you really will be different."

The gospel shuts up your ego and gets it all sorted out so that you're not constantly whiplashing between (a) thinking too much of yourself and (b) being down on yourself. The gospel does this by (a) humbling your ego into the dust with knowledge that you're a sinner and (b) affirming it to the sky by telling you rightly that you're now a son or daughter of the king and that you can't lose that status. As C. S. Lewis taught, you don't think less of yourself or more of yourself; you just think of yourself less. What beautiful community you can have then. What remarkable, transparent relationships. What comfort. How wonderful. No pecking order. No biting and devouring each other.

"Holy nation" doesn't just refer to good relationships. It also implies that money, sex, and power operate completely differently when the ego is sorted, and therefore a godly human society with changed hearts will be a community that shows the world something amazing. Jesus, the light of the world, says to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." That describes what a holy nation is. The Sermon on the Mount describes a holy nation. If we really lived like that, if we really lived as God's treasured possession, as a

kingdom of priests, as a holy nation, we would be the light of the world.

So why do you obey now, as a believer? Not to get accepted. Not to get out of Egypt. You're already out of Egypt. You obey to know, love, serve, and display Jesus. Everything about this differs from the Canaanite religions of the time. For example, most of the ancient cities were built around a ziggurat, a kind of pyramid that served as a temple. The temples were built like that because the priests and holy people would go up to the top to find their god, to offer sacrifices, and to get the favor of the gods. What do you think Mount Sinai is? It is God's chosen ziggurat. It's a pyramid. We don't build ourselves a ladder and go up to find God. We don't say, "We're going to do this and offer sacrifices so that God must bless us." All other religions say, "If you do this and this and this, then you will reach God." Christianity says, "In Jesus Christ, God came to find you." God comes down. You don't go up. God descends.

"The LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud.' . . . Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. . . . The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain" (vv. 9, 18, 20 ESV). God comes down.

Even the commands about washing and having no sex (vv. 10–15) are a way of saying, "We will not be like the Canaanites, like all the other religions. Our religion isn't just a little bit different. The very way we approach God is exactly the opposite in every way." Only the God of the Bible comes down.

This is all because of his grace. "I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself," God says (v. 4). That's grace.

Mine heart owns none before thee,
For thy rich grace I thirst;
This knowing, if I love thee,
Thou must have loved me first.⁶

2) THE TERRIFYING AND BECKONING GOD (EX. 19:9–19)

God is simultaneously frightening and approachable. The visual and auditory effects are astonishing:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” (Heb. 12:18–21)

That passage in Hebrews 12 mentions seven things:

- 1) Fire
- 2) Deep darkness
- 3) Gloom
- 4) Storm
- 5) Trumpet blast
- 6) A voice
- 7) You’ll be killed if you touch the mountain. God says, “I might break out against you. You might perish, so don’t get too close.”

⁶Josiah Conder, “Tis Not That I Did Choose Thee,” 1836.

God is not a warm fuzzy. Maybe somewhere else it's different. Let's see:

- God appears to Jacob as a terrible wrestler.
- God appears to Job as a hurricane.
- God appears to Moses as a blazing fire (twice).
- God appears to Joshua as a man of war armed to the teeth.
- God appears to Ezekiel. Just look at Ezekiel 1. I don't know what he saw, but it was overwhelming. He saw the glory of God. It's one of the most astonishing things written in any kind of human literature. Ezekiel was trying to describe it, and he just sort of went nuts. And some pretty good commentators make a pretty good case that Ezekiel was trying to describe something that words just can't describe.
- God appears to Moses again in Exodus 33. Moses says, "Show me your glory." And God says, "I can't. It would kill you."

Why? What is so terrifying about God?⁷ Why are the people trembling? Are they afraid of getting hit by lightning? No, it's much more profound than that. The terrifying nature of God does not have to have visual and auditory accompaniments at all. Why the terror?

We are in such deep denial about how bad we are. If we could actually see what sniveling cowards we really are, what depths of cruelty we are really capable of, I think we would die. Even the most experienced and mature Christians to a great degree rest their self-regard and ability to look in the mirror and look others in the eye on their being pretty good people. They still have a self-image based largely on their

⁷I won't go into too much detail here because John Piper will be dealing with Isaiah 6, the greatest passage in the Bible explaining what it means to encounter the holiness of God.

virtue. Every culture has a different way of expressing this, but most people tend to think, “I’m a good guy, a decent person; I work hard.” But if you actually saw what you’re really like, you would die. It would be a self-quake. You would just disintegrate.

I once talked to a counselor at an Ivy League school who said that most of the people who get into the Ivy League haven’t had a B+ since pre-kindergarten. To a great degree, their self-image is based on the idea that they are smart, that they’re the smartest kids in town. That’s how they look at themselves in the mirror and look other people in the eye. It’s a disaster to get into an Ivy League school, because everyone else is just as smart, and the professors can’t give everybody As. These professors are under enormous pressure to give everybody As because the kids can’t take it emotionally to receive anything lower. But somebody’s got to get a B and a C. The students are experiencing a self-quake: they thought they were smart their whole life, but now they’re surrounded by people who are clearly smarter than they are. They can’t keep up. It’s incredibly traumatic. They end up on the couch in the counselor’s office, saying, “I don’t know who I am!” If getting into the presence of human superlatives practically decimates you, what must it be to be in the presence of God? Even a sense of the greatness of God makes you feel tiny. Even a sense of the holiness of God makes you feel impure and flawed. Even a sense of the beauty of God makes you feel absolutely shriveled and ugly. That’s why Isaiah, when he got near God, said, “I am unclean.” That’s why Peter, when he got a vision of Jesus’s greatness, said, “Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.” You just fall apart.

You don't have to have thunder and lightning. Recently I was preaching through the Sermon on the Mount and found something very interesting. Virginia Stem Owens, a professor of English and literature, was teaching a university course some years ago at a major secular university.⁸ She gave her students the exercise of reading the Sermon on the Mount and writing a response paper to it. Some of the students hadn't heard of it, and very few had any acquaintance with it at all. When she read the response papers, she wasn't surprised, and yet she was. They hated it. They utterly hated it. In the context of nineteenth-century liberal theology, people used to say, "The important thing is not what you believe about doctrine. It's that you just live according to the Sermon on the Mount because it's just so beautiful. That's how a Christian ought to live." But they clearly had never read it. When these students read it, they said things like this:

- "I did not like the essay 'Sermon [on] the Mount.' It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is."
- "The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery? That is the most extreme, stupid, unhuman statement that I have ever heard."

Virginia Stem Owens knew that the students were desperately looking for cover, because when you read the Sermon on the Mount, you know that this is how you want people around you to live. You just don't think that you can do it yourself. You realize, "This is an arrow pointing at my heart." Virginia Stem Owens's conclusion is that, finally, biblical illit-

⁸Virginia Stem Owens, "God and Man at Texas A&M," *Reformed Journal* 37, no. 11 (1987): 3–4.

eracy has come to the point where people are able to respond to Jesus without filtering it through two thousand years of “cultural haze.” Now, “the Bible remains offensive to honest, ignorant ears, just as it was in the first century.”⁹ When we hear the Bible as it is, it’s terrifying.

I think it was Dr. Lloyd-Jones who said, “If anyone has ever read the Sermon on the Mount with an open mind, they would fall down and cry out, ‘God, save me from the Sermon on the Mount.’” Because what they are experiencing in a little way without the thunder and lightning and special effects is the holiness of God.

C. S. Lewis puts it remarkably:

An “impersonal God”—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God!”) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He had found us!¹⁰

If there is a God, you are, in a sense, alone with Him. You cannot put Him off with speculations about your next-door neighbors or memories of what you have read in

⁹Ibid., 4.

¹⁰C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; repr. New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 150.

books. What will all that chatter and hearsay count (will you even be able to remember it?) when the anesthetic fog that we call “nature” or “the real world” fades away and the Presence in which you have always stood becomes palpable, immediate, and unavoidable?¹¹

Now there’s an evangelistic pitch, the best one I’ve ever heard.

Yet God does not come only in fire but in a cloud: “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud” (Ex. 19:9). God is actually impossible to bear, yet what is he doing in a cloud? Alec Motyer answers, “[He is] so shrouding (not abandoning or diminishing) his glory that he could accommodate himself to live among his people, to grace them with a presence which, in its awful holiness, would spell their destruction.”¹² Even there he is showing, “I still want you in my life, and I want to be in your life. And I know we have a problem: a sinner cannot live in the presence of a holy God. I want you still.”

How can this terrifying God be a beckoning God? Or, to put it another way, how can this God of both fire and cloud (which means a God of both absolute holiness and yet love) be satisfied? He wants holiness and justice and truth, yet he wants us in his arms. How is that going to happen? The answer is a mediator.

3) THE GOING DOWN OF MOSES (EX. 19:20–25)

What’s going on? We’re not totally sure. Motyer and other commentators think that the people were getting lax. They got near; it was scary; yet God would not have brought Moses up simply to say, “The people are in danger of trying to come

¹¹C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 217.

¹²Motyer, *Exodus*, 207.

up to get me.” The point is: “Moses, be a mediator. Go down and warn them and keep them from dying.”

Moses was the mediator. Moses was the man on the mountain. Moses was somehow going to be able to keep the people from perishing. He was the go-between. He went down.

In Hebrews 12 we have an answer as to why it was possible for God even to come to the people in a cloud back then and why we are in a very different situation now:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (vv. 18–24)

When Cain killed Abel, it was the first murder, the first act of overt human injustice. Abel didn’t deserve to die. Cain murdered him:

The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (Gen. 4:10)

And there are other places where the Bible talks about injustice like this. Blood spilt cries out, “Justice! Avenge me!”

The author of Hebrews has the audacity to say Moses was a mediator who kept the people in some kind of relationship with God; he kept them from being killed by God. But Jesus Christ was the *ultimate* mediator. Why? Because when he died on the cross, his blood cried out, “Grace! Accept them! Yes, they have sinned, but accept them because I have paid their penalty!”

What happened to Jesus on the cross?

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). . . . And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split. (Matt. 27:45–46, 50–51)

The temple curtain was like the cloud. It kept the people from being killed by the shekinah glory. But what happened is that Jesus was shaken. The darkness came down on Jesus; the judgment of God came down on Jesus; the thunder and lightning came down on Jesus. So now we don’t need the cloud (or the curtain), because right into our lives comes the holiness of God. Jesus who knew no sin became sin for us, bore God’s wrath for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). We become holy. We can approach the mountain. We *are* the temple now.

What does that mean? On the one hand, it means absolute

joy. We can understand this idea of being God's treasured possession in a way that the Old Testament saints could never have understood. We have absolutely no excuse for not having an intimate prayer life with the God who has revealed himself to us and not only kept us from perishing but also allowed us to be forgiven and to live in loving intimacy with him—with no cloud or curtain in between.

But on the other hand, we still need to be holy. Look what he has done for us!

Because he was shaken (according to the book of Hebrews), we can live unshakable lives.

CONCLUSION

The rest of the New Testament is just playing out what we have read here in the Old Testament. Dr. Lloyd-Jones often said that he loved the Old Testament because it conveyed pictorially, narratively, and vividly what the New Testament often expresses propositionally. So here is the gospel. We have a holy God who wants his people to see him and who makes a way for them to do that without perishing. The Old Testament is full of clouds and mediators by whom people are delivered from the fire of God's holy presence. This God is fire, but this God is also merciful. The God of Mount Sinai is also the God who carries his people out of bondage on eagles' wings. By his grace he saves us, and then he leads us (through the desert) to the Promised Land. But we don't have to wait until the Promised Land to enjoy the fruit of his salvation. Even in the desert he meets us and has fellowship with us. He calls us to live as his people, loved and treasured by him. So Exodus 19 lets us meet this God, but it is not until we come to the New

Testament and to the cross that we can truly come right up the mountain alive, safely into his holy presence, and look into the face of Christ, the final, perfect mediator.

From beginning to end the Bible calls out, “Here is your God!” We’ll hear this call through all the passages expounded in this book. The call in Exodus 19 is an important one at the start. It shows us the history and the order of God’s grace. It shows us both a terrifying and a beckoning God. And it shows us through the story of Moses how this God provides a mediator for his people, wanting them not to perish but to live—to live forever as his treasured, holy possession. This is our God.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) God shows himself to his people in Exodus 19. Sum up what the people see and what God is revealing about himself.
- 2) List all the evidences of God’s grace and mercy you find in Exodus 19.
- 3) What is God after, in Exodus 19? What verses reveal his purpose(s) at work?
- 4) Tim Keller helps us connect Exodus 19 to the New Testament and to the Lord Jesus Christ. How would you put that connection in your own words? What New Testament passages connect most helpfully?
- 5) What will you take away from Exodus 19? Consider questions like: How might taking in this revelation of God affect your thinking and living? What kinds of prayers might Exodus 19 lead you to pray for yourself or for others?

In the Temple

THE GLORIOUS AND FORGIVING GOD

1 Kings 8

PAIGE BROWN

To Moses and then through Moses, God introduced himself to his people as “I AM”—the name that represents his eternal, self-existing, sovereign reality—the truth of who he actually is (Ex. 3:13–15). For this covenant-making God, “I AM” promises “I’m In.” I will be your God. You will be my people. I’m *in*. And immediately, as is the case when anyone promises us he is “in,” we want to know: *How* “in” is he? That big question is progressively answered throughout the Scriptures with the temple. First Kings 8 is the platform passage from which we will grab onto the structural cable of the temple and ride it like a zip line as we do an all-too-brief aerial study of the I AM God who lovingly became I’m *in*.

First Kings 8 contains the temple dedication scene. This

temple, which Solomon built, is so important that three chapters of the Bible (1 Kings 5–7) are given to its construction. It is a permanent, twice-as-big, grander, splendid-er, gorgeous-er version of the tabernacle. It was built with costly stones, covered with cedar sent from King Hiram of Tyre, overlaid with gold, with intricate carvings everywhere, and furnished with costly vessels. The preceding chapters show us its glittering grandeur, its limitless value and worth. Solomon has already built a palace for himself, a palace for a king, but this is *the* palace of *the* King.

So, how *in* is he?

1) THE INHABITANT GOD *IN* A BUILDING

Occupation

Solomon had delayed this dedication for eleven months so that it could be part of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the pilgrimage feast commemorating the wanderings of the people of Israel, wanderings that had long ago ended for them in permanent dwellings where the Lord had given them rest. And now God comes to his permanent dwelling to rest among his people. This gorgeous new temple is complete, and King Solomon gathers the people that they may open up the doors and signal to the Lord, “Come in!” And God *really* does.

A little boy asked his Sunday school teacher as he was playing, “Where is God?” And she said, “Well, you know the answer. God is everywhere.” He responded, “So is he in the Play-Doh can?” And she said, “Well, yes.” And he slapped the lid on and exclaimed, “Well, then, I got him!”

The temple is not a Play-Doh can. God's visible occupation is not an aspect of his omnipresence. This is not his everywhere-ness. This coming in is his absolutely unique, only-here, like-nowhere-else, personal presence—the personal presence that is manifested in the cloud. Though the cloud is not new to Israel (it had led them through the wilderness), this is a new home. And even in this dazzling structure, the presence far outshines the premises. The glory of the Lord strikes more awe than the glory of the temple. And God is still holding back. As Professor Ralph Davis says, “The cloud reveals and conceals.”¹ It is so strikingly visible that of course it means he's *there*. Yet it veils the full blaze of his glory because they could not have survived it. They can see it, but they can't see him—so the cloud is both the showing and the covering of his glory. There is still a hiddenness and a mystery. But even cloaked in a cloud, when he comes *in*, they are rightly chased *out*. The cloud is temporarily expulsive to be instructive. It does not change who he is to them; it reminds them of who he is to them.

My favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Though it covers the antics of the children trying to bring out Boo Radley, and it covers the unjust trial of Tom Robinson in the pre-civil rights South, Harper Lee's novel is not about those things; it's a story about a little girl's relationship with her father. The climax of this story comes right after the gut-wrenching guilty verdict at Tom Robinson's trial. In those days, the evils of segregation demanded that African Americans sit sequestered in what was called the “Negro balcony” in the courtroom,

¹Dale Ralph Davis, *The Wisdom and the Folly: An Exposition of the Book of First Kings* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2002), 81.

which is where the children—Jem and Dill and Scout—had spent the many hours of the trial with their legs dangling over the banister. The guilty verdict has just been handed down. Atticus has run over to try to console Tom, when they both know that there is nothing that can be done. He then turns wearily to put his papers in his briefcase and begins to walk out the center aisle.

“Miss Jean Louise?”

I looked around. They were all standing. All around us, and on the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Reverend Sykes’s voice was as distant as Judge Taylor’s:

“Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passin’.”²

Atticus was already her father. And she already loved him a lot. But she needed to be reminded of who he was.

The cloud comes in, and God’s people don’t merely stand up. They are chased out. They need to be reminded. That’s the effect of his coming in.

But look at the catalyst of God’s coming in. The shekinah (Hebrew for “dwelling”) glory does not come in with the gold. The shekinah glory doesn’t come in with the furnishings. The shekinah glory doesn’t come in with the king. The shekinah glory doesn’t come in with the priest. The shekinah glory comes in with the *ark*. First Kings 8:21 describes the temple as a structure to house the ark of the covenant, which is mentioned eight times in the first few verses.

The ark of the covenant ushers in not just the glory of a

²Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 241–42.

cloud but the glory of God's covenant relationship with his people. That covenant relationship is the uniqueness, the like-nowhere-else-ness. The glory of Israel, the purpose of Israel, is *that* relationship. In the midst of God's omniscience, he is in effect saying to Israel, "Though I know everything, only you have I known." And in the midst of his omnipresence he is saying, "Though I am everywhere, only here do I dwell. And I'm not coming in without this box. I'm coming in with this box."

So the response provoked by this passage is not, "What's in the cloud?" but "What's in the ark?" Verse 9 tells us: it contains the literally handwritten transcript of his will for us—the Ten Commandments, the code of the covenant relationship. God's glory comes in and takes a seat right there on top of that box, right there on top of those tablets. That is the reason he comes in with the ark but not with the prayer. He comes in with his word, not because of their words. Note the order of the passage. Solomon's prayer does not cause God's coming in. God's coming in causes Solomon's prayer. And yet how could they respond to his coming in? How could they respond to God's loving summons, when they can't keep the commandments that are in the ark? They can respond because those tablets are covered with the mercy seat. They have a cover. They are not exposed. We cannot meet God at the ark. We have to meet him at the altar. That's where God and man must meet. So he provides a mercy seat, a covering for the contents of the ark.

But that covering requires a big, yucky mess right in the middle of this gorgeous gold building. Can anything be as strange as all this gold and all this blood, all at the same time,

all in the same place? In 1 Kings 8, we have the pinnacle scene of the entire Old Testament. This is the high point of the history of Israel, here in this simultaneous setting of indescribable splendor and incalculable gore. This is where God comes in. Really *in*. One could ask, “Where is God?” And you could point and say, “He’s in that building.” That’s where he lives. That’s where he has chosen to be. He is *that* in. Now that he is there, they move forward with dedication.

Dedication

This is nothing like our building dedications. It’s not boring, for one thing. There is no list of people to stand and thank, followed by polite clapping, finger sandwiches, and punch. This is not a public acknowledgment of hard work or unity or sacrifice. This is nothing but a celebration of the fulfilled promises of God. The covenant promises of God are the foundation of this temple. The promises of God have brought his occupying glory to this temple. Solomon declares that “there is no God like you,” who keeps what he declares—and then three verses later begs God to keep what he declares (vv. 23, 26). You’ve kept your promises, so keep your promises. This dedication is a day of leaning more fully into the promises of God in ever greater expectancy. The people know what he has done. And yet Solomon pauses also to say not only that they know what God has done; they know who he is. They know his mystery, that he dwells in impenetrable darkness (v. 12); and they know his majesty, that he cannot be contained by heaven and the highest heaven (v. 27).

Then Solomon makes the transition from proclamation to petition with one of the richest words in the Bible, in 1 Kings

8:28. Do you see it? It is the word “Yet.” Mark that word. Solomon is bold to use that grammar of grace that separates biblical faith from all other religions of the world. Other faiths are based on “therefore” systems, “so that” systems, in which what follows flows logically from what has preceded. You work hard to give God or the gods a good record, something that will please them or at least appease them, so that he or they have to bless you: I _____; therefore God _____. That’s the equation. It’s always a causative relationship.

The gospel is never “so that.” The gospel is never “therefore.” It is always “and yet.” It is always “but.” There is no causative connection at all. Read the Scripture looking for this grammar:

Moses: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, *but* it is because the LORD loves you.” (Deut. 7:7–8)

David: “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness.” (Ps. 130:3–4)

Jonah: “I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.” (Jonah 2:4)

Jesus: “I have not come to call the righteous *but* sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:32)

The Prodigal: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. . . . Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” (Luke 15:21–24)

Paul: “By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. *But* now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” (Rom. 3:20–21)

Paul: “For the wages of sin is death, *but* the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23)

We could continue indefinitely. It is the grammar of grace. It’s not causative; it is always contradictory. This is what’s true about me, *but*, Lord, save me anyway! Never *because of*. Always *in spite of*. Not *therefore*. Always *but*.

Solomon knows this, and so he proceeds with that grammar of grace, from making statements about what is true to begging for what does not have to be true. From stating that which is inescapable, God’s glory, to asking for that which is inexplicable, *forgiveness*. He has been going on and on about the otherness and the greatness of God, and *yet*, he says, hear and forgive. All your promises—all your blessing—all our history—all our future—hinge on forgiveness. Think of the things that Solomon could have asked for in the visible presence of God, and yet he prays at long length about the one primary need: forgiveness.

When Ken Tada asked Joni Eareckson for their first date, he worked out all week to get ready for it. He had to. He knew he would have to lift her again and again throughout

the evening. He would have to be able to pull her in that wheelchair all the way up the stairs at the restaurant he had chosen. There was no other way for a quadriplegic. The glaring primary need had to be met in order to move to the primary purpose, which was relationship. The purpose of their date was not lifting. But it was required. The purpose of God's covenant with us is not forgiveness. But it is required. There is no way around it for sinners. It is required in order to move on to his purpose, which is relationship.

Most shocking in this scene—more than the gold-covered building or the animal carnage or even the presence of the glory of God—is the audacity of Solomon's prayer. In the first place, it is audacious in its extensiveness, its breadth. In 1 Kings 8:31–53 Solomon lays out seven petitions for situations that need God's forgiving deliverance, largely drawn from covenant curses forewarned in Deuteronomy 8. Solomon covers the national and corporate sins that bring banishment and exile and drought and famine. And then he covers the personal sins of one man against his neighbor. He is begging for forgiveness in the biggest yuck and in the smallest secret yuck. Read the language again and look for these words: *when-ever, wherever, whatever*. The intention is to generalize about the need for forgiveness for everyone, all the time, everywhere. We know there will be consequences, Lord, but please not condemnation. Please forgive. Audaciously extensive prayer.

It's also audacious in its intensiveness, in its depth. Solomon is in effect saying, "We know you live in a high and lofty place. We know that heaven cannot contain you. We know your transcendence. We know that every time we pray you will always *hear in heaven*." (That's the repeated language

of every petition.) “But come here to do something about it. Please don’t flip a cosmic switch. Come here. Come near. Night and day. Come here to forgive us, to restore us to yourself.” And then he goes on to ask, “Be here with your eyes. Be here with your ears. Be here with your hands. Be here with your mighty arm. Be here with all of your senses, Lord.”

After spending an afternoon at the National Zoo, the kids and I were eating at a nearby restaurant. We suddenly heard the roar of dozens of motorcycles and looked up to see uniformed officers stopping all traffic in every direction. “Guys, here comes the president. Let’s go see him!” We ran out to grab the prime corner spot on the sidewalk as the massive motorcade zoomed toward us. My five-year-old son kept trying to step out into the street. As I was grabbing the back of his shirt, I kept telling him, “Buddy, back up. You can see him perfectly from right here.” “But, Mommy, I want to make sure that he sees me!”

The temple is not so much a place for God’s people to see. It is a place for them to *be seen*. Glory requires forgiveness, but not so that the glory can be seen. It can be seen by the forgiven and the unforgiven. It is so that the glory may see—that we may actually be seen by him. Solomon is acknowledging the breadth and the depth of their sin as he is begging for this breadth and this depth, this extensiveness and intensiveness of God’s forgiving attention to them.

Third, the prayer is audacious in its exclusiveness. Solomon can be so audacious because, as he says in verse 53, we’re your favorite! That’s what he’s saying. “Lord, I’m bold to ask big because we’re your favorite; we’re your heritage.” There is a well-known mock political convention that happens every

election year at Washington and Lee University. Several years ago the Mississippi delegation wore this T-shirt: “Mississippi: Last in Literacy, First in Pulitzer Prizes.” Crazy but true. That could be Israel’s T-shirt: “Israel: Last in Importance, Last in Loyalty, Last in Obedience, First in the Heart of God.” Solomon is saying, “I can ask this because you’ve already said that you love us the best. You love us like you love nobody else.” It’s audacious in its exclusiveness.

Yet the prayer is also audacious in its inclusiveness. Solomon understands that though God has called ethnic Israel to be a special people, it is not so that they can have a permanently unique status. It’s so that they can model a unique status to which he would eventually call all people: “Lord, be here. We understand that we are your mission station. We understand that we have the singular privilege of being the conduit of your redeeming love to the world.” One of the petitions is for the foreigner who will be drawn to the Lord’s glory in his temple and who will call to him there. The temple was not supposed to be a barrier. It was supposed to be a bridge, that all people may come to the Lord. Solomon asks for God to show himself off in his people, “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other” (v. 60).

It is a beautiful, bold prayer. But even with humility and confession, you cannot just ask for forgiveness. It’s got to be paid for. So they don’t throw rice or shoot fireworks or let balloons go at this dedication; they make the blood flow. This ceremony starts and ends at the altar. *That* is why God can see them. He looks through the lens of atoning blood—blood that is daily offered at this temple and annually brought all the

way to the mercy seat. The King has not merely invited the prayers of his people; he has instituted a way of atonement. That is the reason he can be this *in* with a people who are admittedly this sinful. Hence the passage emphasizes the magnitude of the blood: 22,000 oxen, 120,000 sheep, “so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered” (v. 5). But you know what? God can count them. And it is not enough.

This seems like such overkill, but it is underkill, because the blood of even unthinkable thousands of animals can never pay for sin. But it wasn’t supposed to pay for it. It was supposed to point to it. The bulk of these chapters is about the preparations for a great temple. The details are so important only because the temple itself was a great preparation. It was a great preparation for the greater glory that was coming in the fullness and the finality of atonement and forgiveness. The temple was meant to increase their longing, not their independence. And if only that were the story that follows! But within the reign of Solomon himself, Israel begins that downward spiral from dedication of the temple to desecration of the temple.

Desecration

In the very next chapter, 1 Kings 9, God comes back to Solomon to remind him of the conditions of his *in*-ness. “My eyes and my heart will be there for all time” (v. 3). But *your* heart, God continues, and the hearts of those who reign after you, better be here as well! Even so, Solomon is the one who begins the national slide to disaster. The temple as *the* test of the hearts of God’s people is central to the books of Kings. Each

king's reign is summarized by whether he allowed worship and sacrifice any place else. That is the verdict on every single king, whether he honored God in his temple.

The messes that Solomon outlines in his long prayer, these seven case studies, all basically occur in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. Yet almost none of the kings ever look to God in his temple to forgive and deliver. Instead they plunder his temple for gold and silver to pay off the invaders. The repeated accounts, almost to the point of monotony, are of corrupt worship outside the temple and abominations within the temple. They completely lost sight of God's glory, and therefore, of course, they completely lost sight of their need for forgiveness. In this beautiful scene in 1 Kings 8, the glory of God eclipses the temple. Yet quickly and then perpetually, the temple eclipsed God. It became a symbol of their status rather than a sanctioned site for confession of sin. The temple no longer served as the megaphone of a humble plea, "Come in." It served as a manipulation tool to demand, "Come hither."

God's people treated the temple as a guarantee of God's favor and help, an "ace in the hole," even when the Babylonians were upon them and it was game over. They thought they were indestructible. And we think, "How silly." But what are our manipulations? That possession or that status that makes me think I am guaranteed God's favor, regardless of my relationship with him. Perhaps it's our last name. Of course God loves me; I'm so-and-so so-and-so. Perhaps it's our spiritual heritage or our church membership. Of course God loves me; I've been in this church—my family's been in this church—for generations. This is our pew. Of course God loves me; I have this leadership position. I've written books.

I lead Bible studies. I give away 30 percent of my money. I'm Reformed! Of course God loves me; I'm a plenary speaker at The Gospel Coalition. God has to love me—I've got the thing that guarantees it. And that is exactly what Israel thought. So God tells Jeremiah:

Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim. . . . Thus says the LORD of hosts . . . Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." . . . You trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods . . . and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are delivered!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer. 7:2–10)

Could he be any clearer? And they hear, but they will not listen.

I was reading to my three-year-old when we heard my one-year-old crying over the monitor. As I got up to interrupt our book, he said, "No, no, Mommy, I'll take care of her." And I thought, "Ah! I have lived to hear those words!" You know what he did? He got up, and he turned off the monitor. Israel turned off the monitor. They hear Jeremiah's words and instead of responding, "What is wrong with us? What have we done?" they just turn off Jeremiah. They put him in a pit—lock him away so that they don't have to hear it anymore.

We have the recorded visions that God gave to Ezekiel of the abominations in the temple: seventy elders of Israel worshipping loathsome beasts and creeping things; twenty-five

priests standing at the door of the temple with their backs to it while worshiping the sun. In Ezekiel 8, God says he will close his eyes to them. He will close his ears to them (Ezek. 8:18). And then in Ezekiel 10, the glory of the Lord mounts his chariot of cherubim and he *leaves*. The inhabitant God is the *evacuating* God. How *in* is he? He's out! And the temple is a tear-down.

Yet even as he is leaving, God is making promises over his shoulder. Not lesser promises. Bigger promises. Through the same prophets. "The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . They shall all know me" (Jer. 31:31, 33–34). "I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (Ezek. 11:19–20).

There's a school motto that says, "Beyond the Best there is a Better." That's what God is saying: beyond what you thought was the best, there is a better. I am actually coming farther *in*. That is his determination, not because of what is in their hearts but because of what is in his heart. This "better" does not refer to Zerubbabel's rebuilt temple. That was necessary, but it was a lesser, a holding place that made them lean forward saying, "Is this it? Isn't there more? Isn't there something greater?" And God endorses their leaning in Haggai 2, telling them there is a greater glory coming: "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former" (v. 9). That greater glory is not Herod's temple, though it was a magnifi-

cent structure fitting that king's ego and ambitions. No, God is talking about a greater temple glory in a greater presence.

Could the promises be true? After hundreds of years of silence, would he really come back in? Farther in? More fully in? Oh yes! Now he *really* comes in—in a way no one could have ever dreamed. No longer the inhabitant God in a building, but now the incarnate God *in a body*.

2) THE INCARNATE GOD *IN A BODY*

He doesn't come in now with a chariot of cherubim. He comes in amniotic fluid. When is the next time in the Bible after 1 Kings 8 that we actually see *the* glory of the Lord? Do you remember?

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:8–11 kjv)

Is it too familiar to be the craziest thing you've ever heard? The glory of the Lord appears to lowly workers on the night shift as his herald announces, "Do not be chased out. Do not run away. Do not be afraid! He does not come with judgment or covenant curses. Unto you he has come *in!*" *How in?* He is *in* Bethlehem *in* a baby's body wrapped *in* rags lying *in* a barn *in* a feeding trough. He is so *in* that this lowly little scene is the zenith display of his glory in the Scripture. Nowhere else

except in visions do we see the host of heaven. Nowhere else do we hear them sing, "Glory!"

Revelation

The temple had been such a strange combination of splendor and blood so that God and man could meet there. Here is the unimaginable combination: the temple in a person, fully God and fully man. He is that same temple God of glory, but now not hidden away in the Most Holy Place for the special high priesthood but revealed in the flesh to shepherds and tax collectors and lepers and prostitutes. John 1:14 says he "became flesh and dwelt among us," and what have we seen? "We have seen his glory." In the flesh. He is the same temple God of glory.

He is the same temple God of forgiveness. Call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Unto you is born this day a *Savior* who is Christ the Lord. At his baptism he was revealed to be both the Messiah King and the Suffering Servant in one person. The old covenant provoked true astonishment: Why was he willing to be somewhere? But now there is absolute shock: Why is he willing to be *someone*? One could ask, "Where is God?" And you could point and say, "He's crying in a manger . . . working in a carpenter's shop . . . sleeping on a boat . . . reclining at that table . . . walking through the grain fields . . . teaching on the hillside . . . in Simon's house . . . in Matthew's house . . . in Martha's house . . . in the Decapolis . . . in Capernaum . . . in Bethany." He is *that* in.

Solomon had asked God to be present in the temple with his figurative senses. And now God has come with actual

eyes. And he sees Zacchaeus in the tree. He sees the widow of Nain following that coffin. He sees the man by the pool at Bethesda. He has come with actual ears. He hears the lepers calling to him from a distance. He hears Bartemaeus shouting his name. He has come with actual fingers. He touches the eyes of the man born blind. He holds the infants in his arms. He takes Jairus's daughter by the hand and lifts her up. In the temple building God's glory had evicted. In the temple body he has come to embrace. He is a revelation, a reality so astounding that his own apostles cannot grasp it during his life among them. So their query is a refrain in almost every episode in the Gospels: Who is this? Who is this? Who is this? He's the temple.

N. T. Wright says, "The temple has for too long been the forgotten factor in New Testament Christology," because it is perhaps the strongest biblical category for understanding the person of Jesus.³ But even as this revelation is unfolding to his followers, the tension is mounting with those who were still in love with the building and its status and forms—swelling to an unavoidable confrontation.

Confrontation

Jesus is from the beginning closely associated with the Jerusalem temple. He is presented there at forty days old and encounters Simeon and Anna. He is sitting in the temple among the scribes and the teachers at age twelve, reasoning with them. He is attending the temple feasts, teaching in the temple courts, paying the temple tax. He is always acknowl-

³N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Self-Understanding," originally published in *The Incarnation*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56.

edging that it is his Father's house. And yet from early in his ministry he is quick to clarify that the temple is his stage and that he is its superseder—its superior fulfillment. Jesus declared that he was greater than the temple, that he would rebuild in three days the temple they tore down (John explains that he referred to his body), that there would not be one stone of the building left upon another. He claimed pre-eminence, and he showed it: he now receives the praise and worship; he now gives the law on his own authority; he now grants forgiveness.

With every incident and encounter, the mystified thrill of the people increases, and so does the infuriation of the leadership. The tension builds to a crescendo as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The establishment cringes as the crowds hail Jesus as the great deliverer. What does Jesus do, in this his most public moment? He attacks the temple:

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant. (Matt. 21:12–15)

Jesus has come to his rightful home, and it has been stolen. So he rushes in forcefully to cleanse his own house. The incarnate temple is enacting the coming judgment on the architectural temple because wickedness has found a prosper-

ous home there. Extortion abounded. Corruption had turned the temple into a business. Many people could not afford to worship God there. The outer court, the only place for the Gentiles to worship, was overrun. It was a chaotic bazaar. The chief priests were barring people from God instead of bringing people to God.

So replay the tape in your mind. Jerusalem is filled with five to six times its normal population because of Passover, like a shopping mall on the day after Thanksgiving. And Jesus comes running into this crowd and begins turning over tables, knocking over benches, pulling the supports out from under booths, opening cages. Money is flying, people are scrambling, animals are squawking. And he is confronting: What have you done with my house? It is filled with greed instead of salvation. My house is supposed to be a haven of prayer and worship for all people, and you are criminally blocking the way! My house, my temple, is a den of robbers! He comes *in* and does not purge Jerusalem from Gentile defilement. He purges the court of the Gentiles from Jewish defilement. He is not attacking their enemies. He's attacking the Jews' greatest point of confidence.

Yet he hasn't come in to judge. He has come in to save. But he must deal with the fraud and the falseness to clear the way for the temple to serve its purpose, which is ultimately to point to Jesus, who says, "Come to me!"

As he stands in the midst of the wreckage, his flashing eyes suddenly soften with tender compassion, because here come the blind and the lame, groping and hobbling their way into the temple to be near him. Jewish authorities barred the disabled from the temple. They were forbidden from entering

and offering their sacrifices there. Yet now here they come, limping toward him, and not even bringing a sacrifice. They don't have to. He is the sacrifice. They come with only their need, and he accepts them.

And then there are the children. These nonentities in Jewish society are running loose among the learned elite. And they are the only ones who actually get it—praising Jesus right in his temple. When the chief priests and the scribes saw “the wonderful things that he did,” they were “indignant,” filled with hatred, murderous hatred (Matt. 21:15). The confrontation is at a fatal impasse, and it breaks his heart. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . . . How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:37–38). What can he do with a people who will come to the temple but will not come to the outstretched arms of God? It is a fatal impasse, and yet Jesus does not run from it. He comes *in* to it, moving from confrontation to culmination.

Culmination

Jesus was not taken to the cross. Jesus went to the cross. His life was not stolen from him. He laid down his life. The glory of the God who was willing to ordain and institute atonement became the glory of the God who will provide atonement. The glory of the God who *is* the atonement. John Stott says that we should never ever wonder why forgiveness is so difficult but rather how is it possible!⁴ God does not forgive sin. I hope you know that. He can't. He forgives sinners. But sin has to be paid for. Who knew that *this* is what our sin costs? Jesus knew.

⁴John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 88.

He *knew* it, even as he echoed Solomon's prayer and said, "Father, forgive them." And he knew, because he himself was the answer to that prayer, that the Father would turn away from the next prayer in abandonment, which was required for that forgiveness. The unthinkable extravagance of Jesus the temple! The unimaginable cost to the heart of the Father! *This* is the temple dedication. It is his dedication, not ours.

Glory and forgiveness can be combined only because here they are exchanged. The essence of sin is that I put myself in the place of God, so God put his Son in the place of me. Even as I have taken glory that is not mine, he has taken sin that is not his. Because we have put ourselves where only God deserves to be, he has put himself where only we deserve to be. How *in* is he? He left his rightful throne to take my rightful cross. His is the abandonment, and ours is the embrace. His is the price, and ours is the wealth. "Where is God?" He is on that cross. And, oh, the tear-down! Curtain temple torn from top to bottom.

In this culmination there is full cancellation. Engagement is over at the moment of marriage. Pregnancy is over at the moment of birth. And the temple building is over at the moment he says, "It is finished." There's no more point to it. He is the Word. He is the fulfillment of every jot and tittle of the law. He is the priest. He is the sacrifice. He is the mercy seat. He is the glory. He is the temple. No more building. Atonement and mediation complete. The apostle John speaks of the crucifixion as the glorification of God—the radiance of I'm *in*. This was the glory that was veiled on the cross but exploded into open display in the resurrection. Our temple lives in flesh eternal—flesh that is more permanent than stones,

flesh that is more permanent than gold. His is all the glory to have. His is all the forgiveness to give. What do we bring to it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It is all from him. It is all completed in him. And it is all for us.

But then he *leaves*. He takes off visibly on a cloud. Yet he has already promised that this ascension is not a disappearance. It is only a departure. It will not mean his absence; it will mean his heightened presence. Again he is making promises over his shoulder—not lesser promises, but bigger promises. Why? Because beyond the Best there is a Better. That’s exactly what he says in John 16:7: It is actually better for you that I go away, because then I will *really* come *in*.

Yet their eyes float up, watching him go, and they think, “Come back! Come back!” Not, “Come in!” But his promise is, “I’m *in*.” No longer the inhabitant God in a building. No longer only the incarnate God in a body. Now the indwelling God in *our* bodies.

3) THE INDWELLING GOD *IN* OUR BODIES

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:1–4)

To the gathering of bewildered believers in that upper room on the day of Pentecost, God came visibly, just like he had in the past, to his former dwelling places. This time he did not come by one big shining cloud appearing to his gathered peo-

ple but by little glory flames on each of his gathered people. This meant what it has always meant—I'm *in*. In to live and in to stay. The passage doesn't say the room was filled with him. It says *they* were filled with him. What did that make them? What does that make us? It makes us temples of the living God. Jesus had said it, as he told them he was going away: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Speaking also of his Father, Jesus said: "We will come to him and make our home with him." Jesus also promised "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name" (John 14:18, 23, 26). This is not lesser. This is *bigger*. The coming of the Holy Spirit did for this group what nothing had done so far—not three years of Jesus's private teaching, not his miracles, not performing miracles themselves, not witnessing Lazarus raised, not watching Jesus's crucifixion, not even being with the risen Christ. It is *this* day that transforms them.

This is true for us as well. It's not his influence or inspiration or instruction but his indwelling that changes us. We get to say, "Come in!" And he *really* does! "Where is God?" He is in *me*, in a unique, like-nowhere-else, personal way. In to live and in to stay. This is the strangest temple combination of all. More than gold and blood. More even than fully God and fully man. He *in* me and you, and we in him. If you clasp your hands together, is your right hand in your left hand, or your left hand in your right? They are too joined to tell. That's a picture of our union with Christ, and that is the reason the Bible's language flip-flops all the time. We in him. He in us. The presence of his Spirit is so fully his presence that the indwelling of Christ is spoken of as the indwelling of the Spirit, and the indwelling of the Spirit is spoken of as the indwelling

of Christ—not because they are compounded or confused but because of their dynamic equivalence. Christ is *in* through his Spirit. The temple is not a nice picture or analogy of what we are. It is who we are in union with him.

Facets of Our Templeness

What are the facets of our templeness? Just refer back to the facets of the temple. First, glory. Now, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shines in *our hearts* in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Next, the Word. As before, the glory comes with the Word, which is now given to us as the directions of his love rather than as the life-and-death demands of the law. It is no longer written on tablets of stone, but on our hearts by the Spirit who, we are promised, will teach and remind us of all these things as he guides us into all truth. Third, we are now the site of forgiveness, fully and finally accomplished as our atonement lives in us, through a substitutionary exchange so complete that we have become the righteousness of God. Further, though there is no more blood required in this temple, there are still sacrifices—us, living sacrifices presented as our spiritual act of worship. And the temple is still the place of prayer. We no longer need a building; we have full access to the Father through the indwelling Spirit who translates our prayers, interprets our groaning, and groans for us when we cannot pray anymore.

Finally (a topic for a whole other chapter), the temple is still the place for the congregation or the assembly. The temple is fully who we are as persons, but each of us is not all the temple is. I am defined as the temple. The temple is not defined as me—“I will be your God and you will be my

person.” That is not the covenant. God promises, “I will be your God, and you will be my *people*.” As Ephesians 2 explains, this requires *all* the people—the fullness of all God’s people in all places. But it also requires *each* of the people. There are individual aspects of my templehood and yours that the whole needs. Look at the facets of our templehood—the New Testament declarations of who we are. But what about the demands? Those come with the repeated piggy-back language of “fullness.”

Fullness of Our Templehood

You know the repeated indicative/imperative language of fullness: you *are* filled with the Spirit—therefore *be* filled with the Spirit. Now, let’s get theologically deep for just a moment. What does “filled” mean? My four-year-old can tell you. It means there “ain’t no room” for anything else. No more room in our hearts. No more room in our bodies. No more room in our minds. No more room except for God and the me that he is creating. I no longer live; Christ lives in me. We love to camp out on the wonderful truth that we have the fullness of him. But we need to move the campsite to the truth that he is therefore to have the fullness of us. Please hear me. We are never working *for* our templehood. We are never working *toward* our templehood. We can’t. In order that we be temples, he has to come in and fill us. But he has! And we must therefore work *from* our templehood. We must reason from it. We must wrestle from it. This is what Paul is constantly doing. Note the order of what he says in 2 Corinthians 6. We *are* the temple of the living God—therefore let us cleanse ourselves, body and spirit, to bring holiness to completion (vv. 16–17).

Paul would never sing:

Oh be careful little eyes what you see.

Oh be careful little ears what you hear.

For the Father up above is looking down in love.

So be careful little feet where you go.

Nice thoughts. Sweet tune. Terribly inadequate theology. So keep the tune. But change the content, and sing with Paul:

Oh be careful, beloved one, to keep your clothes on,

With any but the one who is your spouse.

For you're the very temple of the living God, and *how*

Could you sexually sin with Christ living in your body?

I know that could be a little awkward in preschool Sunday school. But it is the only reality that will transform us. It is not just a Father up above looking down in love. It is the Father and Son living in us by the Spirit. We've got to reason and wrestle from the full implications of his fullness.

Does my watching a particular movie or laughing at a certain YouTube video correspond to my temple-ness? Does my drinking so much or eating so little square with my temple-ness? Are my workplace manner and practices directed by my temple-ness? Does my jealousy and resentment of another demonstrate my temple-ness? Is my spending so much money, so much time, so much energy, so much conversation, and so much thought on the way that I look determined by my temple-ness? Can social superiority, racial superiority, or spiritual superiority coexist with my temple-ness? Does our very living deny our temple-ness?

We're warned about it in Titus 1:16: "They profess to know

God, but they deny him by their works.” How *in* is he? He is so in that the God who came with eyes and ears and hands and feet is to fill our seeing and our hearing and our doing and our spending and our going and our thinking. There is no place for the attitude that what I do with my money and my body and my work and my relationships is up to me as long as my heart is fully committed to Jesus. *None* of it is up to me, because He fills *all* of it. The Spirit is *in* me to tell me who Christ is but also to tell me who I really am, and to provide everything for me in Christ actually to become that person. And we can be confident about the fullness of our temple-ness because of the force of our temple-ness.

Force of Our Temple-ness

Look again at *who* is in us: “You . . . are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit. . . . If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom. 8:9, 11). How powerful is the force of his presence? Who raised Jesus from the dead? He who is at work in us. He is the guarantee of our own physical resurrection. Have you ever seen a body in a coffin? He is going to bring *that* body back to life. So reason from the greater to the lesser: if he can overcome my death, don’t I know that he can overcome my habits? My temptations? My fears? My flesh?

Yes, there is Spirit-flesh warfare, but he is greater, and he *will* progressively win. Not only will we see more and more of his glory but also, from his *in*-ness, *we* are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. We have moved in the history of redemption from the glory that is shown to the

glory that is *shared*. We are, as Scripture says, “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

As we rejoice in the certainty of our templeness, and as we work from the confidence of our templeness, we know that even this templeness is not permanent. Our “Come in!” is not the final word. His indwelling is not our final state. Even this is a preparation. There is still a leaning and a longing because beyond the Best there is a Better. He is still *really* coming. The inhabitant God in a building, the incarnate God in a body, the indwelling God in our bodies will come as the inviting God.

4) THE INVITING GOD

His word to us is the final word. It is that which we live to hear. What is it? What will he say to us? “Come *in!*” The Lord of glory does not wait for us. He doesn’t beckon us. He doesn’t send for us. He *comes* for us. I AM comes for us. I’m *in* comes for us with outstretched arms and says, “*You’re in!*” His work will be so complete in us that we are complete, glorified. No more veils. No more clouds. No more dim vision. *No more temple.* We will see him as he is. We will be like him. We will be eternally with him, living with him, on his throne and in his lap.

My grandparents loved their new pastor and his family. He had been serving the church in the small Mississippi town for only a couple of years when his wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor that quickly took her from him and their four young children. During her illness, when she was already very frail, she walked through the town square into the floral shop owned by church members. They felt awkward as she entered, because they were working on big, beautiful sprays

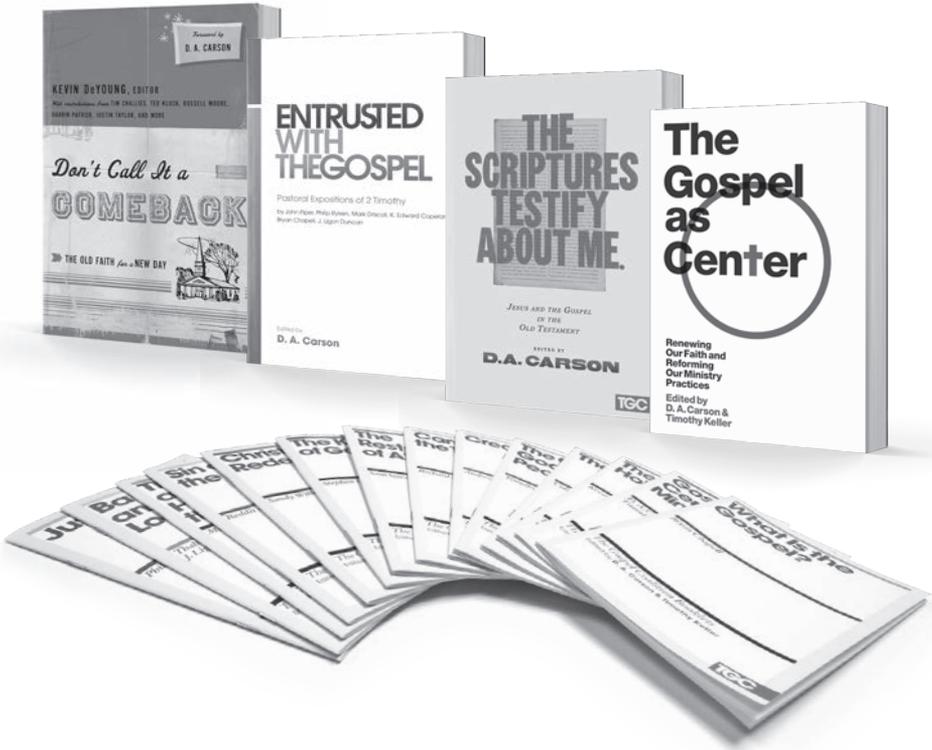
of flowers for a funeral that afternoon. They looked at her with pained smiles as she greeted them very brightly. She walked right over to the counter, looked through the cards, picked one, and put her arm around her friend as she said, “This is the card I want on all my funeral flowers.” It read, “Welcome to your new home.”

Jesus says, I am coming again, for one reason: that where I am you may be also—forever *in* with him who is our eternal home.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) God shows himself to his people—spectacularly!—in 1 Kings 8. Sum up what the people see and what God is showing about himself.
- 2) How does what we learn of God in 1 Kings 8 both build on and add to the revelation we saw in Exodus 19?
- 3) Solomon speaks many wise words in 1 Kings 8. List some of the key truths about God that he acknowledges in his words to Israel and to the Lord.
- 4) Paige Brown took us on a quick “aerial study” of the Bible’s temple theme. In a few sentences, sum up that trip and its climactic destination in the New Testament.
- 5) How do you respond to this temple scene and this temple theme? If *this is your God*, what difference might that make to you today or tomorrow, both in your communion with God and in your interaction with others?

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