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Exodus 24:1-11

Fifty-third Message

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IT'S YOUR WEDDING!

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

As June, the season for weddings, begins, my question to you today is: Do you enjoy weddings? For family and friends, perhaps no other occasion provides as much anticipation and celebration as a wedding: under the canopy of God's love and his holy ordinances, two families come together to relinquish a son and a daughter to become one flesh and begin the journey of creating a new family. As candles are lit, music resounds, and beautiful maidens are escorted down the aisle to attend the bride and groom, everyone is caught up in the sacred moment of two individuals lost in admiration of each other. For the married, a wedding ceremony is a holy reminder of the high calling of matrimony and their earlier vows; for the young, a wedding raises the standard for a love that the Bible calls sacred; and for others who may be single or divorced, weddings may heighten loneliness and intensify deep longings for intimacy. Beyond our personal feelings, however, something much more profound occurs at a wedding. More than any other social occasion, weddings draw us deeper into the mystery of God's love, for "wedding" is the metaphor that frames the entire story of our salvation, from Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, to the marriage supper of the Lamb in the book of Revelation.

Though I have proclaimed this truth, quoting Paul's words in Ephesians 5:21-33 at a host of weddings that I have performed, it wasn't until I had the privilege of being the father of the bride that it finally sank in for me. Entering the doorway of our church with my daughter by my side, and gazing into the loving eyes of longtime friends and family who stood in honor of the bride, I had the sudden sensation of what the end of history will be like as we are escorted down the aisle to meet our Savior.

Today we come to the climactic wedding ceremony between God and Israel, and the conclusion to establishing God's covenant, which began in Exodus 19 with God's theophany on Mount Sinai, and was followed by the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. God's covenant with Israel will now be sealed with holy vows and a covenant ceremony that has all the elements of a wedding.

Literary Outline Exodus 24:1-11

- a The Covenant Processional: The invitation up the mountain (1-2)
- b The Verbal Offer of Covenant and Israel's Initial Consent (3)
 - transition:* Moses prepares the written documents of covenant obligations (4a)
- b' The Covenant Ceremony and Israel's Formal Consent (4b-8)
- a' Covenant Celebration: The Communal Meal on the Mountain (9-11)

There is a processional up the mountain, the initial question of commitment to the bride, and the preparation of legal documents, followed by the actual covenant ceremony "whereby Moses dramatically and liturgically binds Israel to Yahweh."¹ After the formal ceremony, a celebration follows, with a communal meal in the awesome presence of God. This pivotal moment in the history of Israel gives a preview of Jesus' ministry, particularly his transfiguration, and the inauguration of the New Covenant in the upper room during his final Passover. The moment also gives a cameo vision of the Marriage Supper of the lamb at the end of history (Isa 25:6-9; Rev 19:9). As we examine each of these themes

I want you to imagine that this is your wedding, and a reflection of the intimacy God longs to have with you.

I. The Covenant Processional: The Invitation Up the Mountain (24:1-2)

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him." (24:1-2 NIV)

The text opens with God's invitation to Moses and the leaders to ascend the mountain to worship him. Though God desires intimacy with us, his holiness must be protected, therefore only Israel's leadership is allowed access into his presence, and even they must proceed with holy caution. Moses, as the nation's leader and founder, is invited to the top of the mountain. Aaron and his sons, along with the seventy elders, must worship at a distance, while the rest of the people must remain at the foot of the mountain. The scene highlights Moses' authority in his unique relationship to God, and also sets Israel's future leadership apart, as Aaron and his sons represent the future priesthood and the seventy elders represent Israel's future civic leaders. This three-tiered vertical division will be replicated horizontally in the tabernacle, with an outer court, holy place, and holy of holies. Peter Enns observes that the making of the tabernacle was God's way of making his presence, which "*settled*" on Mount Sinai (24:14), "portable," so that during their journeys, God would be just as accessible as he was at Sinai (Exod 40:34-38).²

Before we find out what actually occurred on the mountain, Moses journeys back down to make known the detailed obligations of God's covenant relationship with Israel.

II. The Verbal Offer of Covenant and Israel's Initial Consent (24:3-4a)

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. (24:3-4a)

Moses faithfully tells "the people all the Lord's words and laws," which are most likely a reference to the Ten Words and the Book of the Covenant ("laws" = *mishpatim* – "judgments," usually in civil cases). After he details the heart of Israel's obligations in the Ten Commandments, and their application in daily life, Israel once again (19:8) gives her enthusiastic commitment to accept all that the Lord required in the covenant: "Everything the LORD has said we will do."

Immediately following Israel's verbal assent, Moses went to work to formalize the covenant by putting it all down in writing. The importance of this act cannot be overemphasized. Like an official marriage license, it gave God's gracious gift of the law a permanent place in Israel's memory. As Stuart comments, "Thus regular reading and rereading of the written covenant at appointed times served to keep it alive in the minds of the people as the basis for their life together with the one true God."³ The

record of Moses' writing is also the Scripture's earliest witness to itself as to how the law was handed down in all its purity. The record of these laws was the faithful work of Moses, who recorded firsthand what he heard from God on the mountain. It was not a revisionist reworking of Israel's history from a scribe during Israel's exile or postexilic period, as many modern commentators would have us to believe.

Early the next morning, Moses went to work to set the stage for the actual "wedding" ceremony between God and his people by building an altar at the foot of the mountain to represent God, and setting up twelve stone pillars to represent Israel.

III. The Covenant Ceremony and Israel's Formal Consent (24:4b-8)

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (24:4b-8)

Outline of the Covenant Ceremony

Introduction: Setting the stage (4b)

a Covenant sacrifices (5)

b The first party of the covenant is sealed in blood (the altar) (6)

x Reading of the Book of the Covenant followed by vow of assent (7)

b' The second party of the covenant is sealed in blood (the people) (8a)

a' Covenant pronouncement (8b)

After Moses built the altar and set up twelve pillars in the presence of all the people, several young men were commissioned to play the role of priests by sacrificing burnt and fellowship offerings on the altar. Burnt offerings were totally consumed on the altar (thus the Hebrew term *'oleh*, derived from the verbal root *'alah*, "to go up" in smoke), and were "typically made for atonement for sin and consecration, that is, devotion and commitment to God."⁴ Burnt offerings became the most common feature of Israel's sacrificial system. They were offered on a daily basis every morning and evening to serve as a constant reminder of the necessity of atoning blood to forgive sins, for as the writer of Hebrews states, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). Fellowship or "peace" offerings celebrated fellowship between God and his people. They consisted of a shared meal between the priests and the people, while the fat portions of the sacrifice were offered up to God on the altar.

After the sacrifices were made, Moses sprinkled half of the blood on the altar, signifying God's commitment to keep his covenant obligations. Israel is not asked to obey without first being under girded by God's fidelity to his promises and the gift of his immeasurable grace. Then Moses took the Book of the Covenant that he had written the night before and solemnly read it before Israel. The reading of the Book of the Covenant takes pride of place in the ceremony, not only in terms of the length of time that is devoted to it, but also as the centerpiece of the ceremony (x) around which everything else revolves.

After Moses read all the laws, Israel responds with an even more enthusiastic and emphatic reply than her initial commitment: "All that the

LORD has spoken we will *faithfully* do." (v. 7 JPS) Six times in this text the word "all" is used to show that the multitude of laws that Moses transcribed are indeed but "one package" of Israel's singular expression of loyalty to God. To compromise on one is to forsake all (Jas 2:10). Only after the people agree to their obligations of the covenant does Moses give them their "wedding ring," by applying the atoning blood to them.

Then that special moment for which everyone anticipates at a wedding arrives – the holy pronouncement: "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (v. 8). With these words the two parties are now inextricably joined as one. Waltke observes that "[it] is called 'the blood of the covenant' because it effects the covenant relationship by cleansing them from sin... Thus by Israel's commitment and by cleansing blood for the elect they are sanctified to God's service"⁵ to be priests to the entire world.

At a traditional wedding the groom is now finally given permission to kiss the bride, while shouts of joy and applause break out among the guests. After the new couple is introduced, the minister invites the wedding guests to join them in a meal of celebration with fellowship and dancing. So too at Israel's wedding after the exchange of marital vows there is a celebratory meal, but this one is like no other in history.

IV. Covenant Celebration: Communal Meal On the Mountain (24:9-11)

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (24:9-11)

In one of the most astonishing and inexplicable texts of the Old Testament we are escorted into the dreadful, the impossible and the unutterable. Does God realize the implications of his invitation to come up the mountain? Will his request for proximity draw these leaders dangerously close to the edge, where human lives will be vaporized in the fire of pure holiness? Imagine the incredulous murmurings among the people at the bottom of the mountain. How can they be so naïve? Didn't anyone give a warning shout? Will these seventy-four men "go up" (*'oleh*) in smoke and ashes like the burnt offerings below? How will they manage to lift their feet each step up the steep slope under the weighty gravity of fear?

But somehow in a blind obedience that they may have learned from their father Abraham (Gen 22:1), they go, and we are privileged to go with them into that awful moment: "They saw God." There he was, actually present and "fully visible in concrete form. In verse 11, the theme intensifies: "They beheld God,' or better, 'They gazed upon God.' The scene suggests a stunned, astonished silence. They look and are mesmerized. They do not speak; they do not move."⁶ Finally, after a prolonged silence they are able to look up just enough to gaze on the platform upon which God is standing, but even that is so indescribably holy that words fail and give way to simile, "like a pavement made of sapphire," and its purity or clearness was "like the sky itself." Their eyes go no further.

At this moment they must have thought they were finished. Is this how their lives would end? But no, to our utter amazement the text reads, "Yet against the leaders of the sons of Israel *he did not stretch out his hand*. Instead they beheld God, and they ate and drank." (I have preserved the Hebrew word order to show how the narrator suspends our emotions by placing the verb "stretch out" after its object). By some miracle of God's grace the leaders are not only spared from death, but are actually permitted to keep their eyes open and gaze in wonder and awe as long as they like. How long they were allowed to gaze we do not

know, but we do know that they stayed through lunch: “and they ate and drank.”

So reticent and brief is the text that we are left awestruck and dumb. But we can consider two very important implications from this encounter, the first regarding God's surprising passion for intimacy, and the second, the means he has given us to cultivate our intimacy with him.

V. Implications for Our Wedding

A. We Must Understand God's Passion for Intimacy

First and foremost we begin to see that God longs to be intimately present with his people. How strong is that passion? Here we discover that on this occasion he will override the normal laws of the universe to make it possible for a human being to ascend the unapproachable mountain where he dwells, enter the scorching fire of his holiness, and not get burned. Exactly what was involved in the holy “override” we will never know, but the fact that it happens so rarely in Scripture gives us a clue that it was no easy feat. Consider what impact that would have had on you had you been Moses. These rare, intimate encounters become a preview of God's ultimate purpose to have his dwelling among men.

In the next scene (24:12-18), Moses is invited even higher up the mountain to receive the official copy of the covenant documents. After six days of climbing and waiting, he finally gets his audience with God inside the cloud on the seventh day (this may be a deliberate echo of Genesis 1, signifying an epoch-making “new creation”). Once again as the Israelites looked on from below, Deity invites humanity into his unapproachable abode:

God called to Moses from the within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (24:16b-18)

The sweet intimacy that God experienced for a few hours with Israel's leaders is now extended well past a month with Moses. But its aim was not to keep Moses isolated in God's heavenly abode, but to give him plans to construct a portable “dwelling” that would make it possible for the holy God to leave his abode and descend to the dung of the desert, just for the privilege of going “backpacking” with his people. What God is like the God of Israel, who is so holy that when his feet merely approach the earth, the ground quakes in a violent eruption, and yet, that same God is so hungry for closeness that he will confine all that holiness inside a portable tent so that he can lumber alongside his bride through a wild wasteland? What does that do to your vision of the Old Testament God, who is normally depicted as an austere and uncompromising Judge? Here he looks more like a lovesick groom who is about to jump out of the airplane just to be with “the one whom his soul loves.” As Fretheim comments, “God is determined to provide the people with regular access to God's more intensified forms of presence; such is the will of God to be as forcefully present with the people as possible.”⁷

But abiding in Israel's tent (and later in the temple) is still not the end of the story. Why? Because you have not yet taken center stage at the wedding! Israel's marriage covenant must extend beyond the nation to embrace the whole world.

Six days after Peter made his confession that Jesus was the Messiah, three of the disciples found themselves on a high mountain, where Jesus was transfigured before them alongside Elijah and Moses. Like their predecessors, they had no words. They could only articulate the glory they saw in similes: “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). As they beheld “the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), they came to the realization that the glory of God that once

“settled” on Sinai and later “dwelt” in the tabernacle, had now “become flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Later, in the intimacy of the upper room, they began to understand the price God was willing to pay to fulfill his purpose to be intimate with us: God has to suffer. Jesus transforms his final Passover into a New Covenant in his blood which, once shed, would “sprinkle many nations” (Isa 52:15), and multiply the marriage feast world wide, until that great day which Isaiah foretold:

**On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken. (Isa 25:6-8)**

Now that God has established the New Covenant in his blood for the whole world, how can we as his bride cultivate our intimacy with him?

B. Cultivating Our Intimacy with God

The clue to answering that question may be found in the shape of our text. It is bracketed with worship on the mountain, while the center is dominated by God's word, which is first given orally, then written down to be read for future generations. In his study of the presence of God in the Old Testament, Samuel Terrien calls these two aspects of Israel's spirituality the “ethical ear” and the “contemplative eye.”⁸ On the one hand we experience God's real presence in the attentive “listening” and obedience of his revealed word.

Just as the reading of the Book of the Covenant occupies center stage in the wedding ceremony, so the apostles maintained the same priority in the early church. There is no possibility of experiencing the “real” presence of God apart from word of God found in Christ, for “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known” (John 1:18). Paul exhorts Timothy to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). Much of the tragic moral failure of the evangelical church today lies in its utter ignorance of the teachings of the Scriptures. How can one be obedient to the New Covenant when its doctrines are not clearly taught and its divine provision of the Spirit, which far surpasses the Old Covenant as day outshines the night, remains a mystery? May we keep Paul's word to Timothy constantly before us:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:14-17)

But on the other hand, “hearing” is to be complemented with “seeing.” The rigorous energy employed in obedience is to be balanced by the quiet discipline of contemplation and awe. “Worship grounds the ins and outs of daily life in God. Obedience to the task set for the people is in need of sustenance provided by the ongoing experience of the promised presence of God in worship. Without the presence of God, there would be no point in Israel's continuing journey. Worship must inform and under gird obedience.”⁹

Because most evangelicals are not as at home with liturgy and sacrament as we are with “serious Bible study,” and may be fearful of anything that might open the door to mysticism, we seldom explore this side of the “mountain.” But, as Ellen Davis suggests, when grounded in God’s word, “Mysticism is not an escape from reality, but the opposite. It is a prayerful penetration of reality, guided by both the imagination and the scriptures—which address themselves in such large part to the imagination.”¹⁰ Neglecting this aspect of our spirituality leaches God’s life-Spirit out of all our busy “doing,” and may be in large part why “Too many souls are stunted, arrested in permanent adolescence.”¹¹ The truth of the matter is that most of us are utterly afraid of intimacy. Therefore the thought of gazing “upon the beauty of the Lord,” or engaging in a daylong silent retreat, seems totally foreign to us. Like Job, we may have been pious and spotless, but we are in desperate need of an encounter with God in the whirlwind, so that we might say, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). What will it really be like to “dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, *to gaze on the beauty of the Lord*” (Psa 27:4)? Perhaps Brueggemann’s illustration of a British hostage’s senses that were “reborn” after he had been released from years of captivity in Lebanon approaches it: “He reports that after four years of confinement, he and his cohorts were given a bowl of red cherries, the first fruit and the first color they had seen in four years. Despite their eagerness to taste the fruit, he reports, they waited a day, simply to gaze upon the cherries in wonder and gratitude. The mundane report may hint at what the priest and elders did at Sinai: they gazed before they ate.”¹²

As the apostles of the New Covenant tell us, without this kind of “seeing” there is no spiritual transformation:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18 NASB)

May God help us to recover our sight before the Wedding.

1 Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *NIB*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:880.

2 Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 492.

3 Douglas L. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 553.

4 Enns, *Exodus*, 490.

5 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology, An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

6 Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 881.

7 Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God, An Old Testament Perspective* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 63.

8 Quoted in Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 882.

9 Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 260.

10 This quote is taken from Ellen Davis’s enlightening chapter on the Song of Songs, where she gives superb insights on our longings for intimacy. Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God, Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2001), 81.

11 Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 80-81.

12 Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 883.