

## Daily Bible Study (Unit 2)

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**September 28**

Psalms 73:21-28

**September 29**

Psalms 119:105-112

**September 30**

Deuteronomy 5:23-33

**October 1**

Exodus 19:1-8

**October 2**

Exodus 24:3-8

**October 3**

Hebrews 9:18-23

**October 4**

Exodus 24:1-2, 9-12

**October 5**

Psalms 5:1-12

**October 6**

Psalms 73:21-28

**October 7**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

**October 8**

Joshua 24:1-13

**October 9**

Joshua 24:14-21

**October 10**

Joshua 24:22-28

**October 11**

Judges 2:6-12

**October 12**

Psalms 19:8-11

**October 13**

Psalms 89:1-18

**October 14**

Psalms 119:97-104

**October 15**

2 Timothy 3:14-17

**October 16**

2 Peter 1:19-21

**October 17**

Nehemiah 8:1-12

**October 18**

Nehemiah 8:13-18

**October 19**

Zachariah 9:9-12

**October 20**

Ephesians 2:11-14

**October 21**

Matthew 5:17-20

**October 22**

Hebrews 12:18-24

**October 23**

Luke 22:7-13

**October 24**

Matthew 26:26-30

**October 25**

Luke 22:14-20



## Unit 2

# Remember Who You Are

The quarter's second unit of lessons challenges us to explore our identity as God's people. Included in this identity are the ideas of commitment and responsibility. God initiates our relationship and promises to fulfill the divine side of the equation. But we must choose to respond to God's actions of grace, love, and relationship.

We will explore times when God acted to form the community of people and agreed to sustain that community. At Sinai, Moses brought the teachings. (The word *Torah* can mean "law" or "teachings.")

These teachings became an act of grace because they instructed the people on how to become God's community. The people promised to follow the teachings after God's powerful act of delivering them from Egypt. Once the people reached the Promised Land after their journey through the wilderness, Joshua led them to remember their identity and again promise to live according to the teachings.

Years later, Ezra and Nehemiah had to again call the people to reclaim their identity after the terrible event of the Exile. After 50 years of oppression, they exhorted the community to refresh their commitment to become the people of God.

In the sacrament of Communion, Jesus presents God's decisive action to act in salvation. The sacrament includes God's actions through Jesus for the people and the commitment of the people to form a new community.

# October 4

## Lesson 5

### Our Mysterious but Approachable God

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**Focal Passage:** Exodus 24:1-12

**Background Text:** Same

**Purpose Statement:** To forgive ourselves for failing to live up to the covenants God offers us while seeking to become more obedient

#### Exodus 24:1-12

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders, and worship from a distance. <sup>2</sup>Only Moses may come near to the LORD. The others shouldn't come near, while the people shouldn't come up with him at all."

<sup>3</sup>Moses came and told the people all the LORD's words and all the case laws. All the people answered in unison, "Everything that the LORD has said we will do." <sup>4</sup>Moses then wrote down all the LORD's words. He got up early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain. He set up twelve sacred stone pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup>He appointed certain young Israelite men to offer entirely burned offerings and slaughter oxen as well-being sacrifices to the LORD. <sup>6</sup>Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls. The other half of the blood he threw against the altar. <sup>7</sup>Then he took the covenant scroll and read it out loud for the people to hear. They responded,

"Everything that the LORD has said we will do, and we will obey."

<sup>8</sup>Moses then took the blood and threw it over the people. Moses said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD now makes with you on the basis of all these words."

<sup>9</sup>Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel went up, <sup>10</sup>and they saw Israel's God. Under God's feet there was what looked like a floor of lapis-lazuli tiles, dazzlingly pure like the sky. "God didn't harm the Israelite leaders, though they looked at God, and they ate and drank."

<sup>12</sup>The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there. I'll give you the stone tablets with the instructions and the commandments that I've written in order to teach them."

**Key Verses:** "Then he took the covenant scroll and read it out loud for the people to hear. They responded, 'Everything that the LORD has said we will do, and we will obey.' Moses then took the blood and threw it over the people. Moses said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD now makes with you on the basis of all these words' " (Exodus 24:7-8).

In the previous lesson, we talked about John Wesley's struggles over his faith. Part of those struggles were over feeling forgiven. After years of doubt, he felt in his soul during a memorable meeting at Aldersgate that God had forgiven his sins.



If we study Martin Luther, we discover that he also felt guilt and had trouble experiencing God's mercy and forgiveness. He wrote, "Although I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience."<sup>1</sup> We might take comfort from knowing that spiritual giants such as Wesley and Luther struggled with guilt, just as we do, but we don't want to encourage excessive guilt.

The church faces the stereotype of piling loads of guilt onto people. Although we need to face our sins honestly, without falling into denial, the gospel message proclaims God's love and forgiveness. We often have trouble feeling God's grace, love, and mercy.

Some of the best, most virtuous people I have known will quickly tell you that they fall short of living out a Christian life. Other people I have known, who might not have seemed to me as virtuous, showed less inclination to confess their sins or seek God's forgiveness. Our recognition of our sins, our willingness to confess and seek forgiveness (from God or other people), and our feelings of guilt can become complicated. Our understanding of our guilt and our ability to receive and accept forgiveness can serve as indicators of our spiritual health.

This passage from Exodus gives us a good opportunity to look at how we read Scripture. On the surface, we have a narrative that we find difficult to relate to. We have trouble reading this passage literally.

According to the text, 74 people actually saw God. We find it difficult to grasp the notion that God even has a body that people can see or that we could find a place to locate God. This idea contradicts other Scriptures that teach us that God does not have a body that we can see.

John 4:24 says, "God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth." Other Old Testament texts, such as Isaiah 6, suggest that one can see God, but that text describes a vision, not seeing God with human eyes. If we can agree,

at least, that we have trouble understanding a text about seeing God with human sight, then we can talk about a helpful way to read Scripture. We read, not to try to understand how the details of the narrative could have happened, but to see the deeper teachings that the narrative conveys.

Rather than try to figure out how people could see God, we should see what the narrative teaches us about how to understand God. The passage communicates two seemingly paradoxical things about God and important themes for understanding Christian ethics: how we live our lives in obedience to God. In reading this narrative, and other biblical narratives, we look for the important teachings about God communicated by the details of the narrative.

## A Mysterious God

The Bible consistently portrays God as majestic, glorious, powerful, and transcendent (over and above the creation). God can bring light out of darkness with only a word (Genesis 1:3). People cannot go anywhere beyond God's access (Psalm 139). No one can understand divine thoughts (Isaiah 40:28). God is greater than any person, human ruler, or idol that people can make.

This idea of God's majesty and power, which places God beyond human understanding, lies behind the assumption in this passage that, under ordinary circumstances, people cannot behold God. Earlier in Exodus, the people were warned not to seek an opportunity to see God (Exodus 19:21).

I have encountered many people who assume that clergy have direct access to God. But in Exodus 19, even priests are told not to come near to God and to avoid trying to see God. The passage contains the idea that the experience of seeing God would lead to death because it would be too much for people to handle and that God needed to use the threat of death to prevent the attempt to see God.

We should not understand that as an indication of vindictiveness, but as a

message about how the full presence of God is beyond our comprehension. Later in Exodus, when God revealed the divine presence to Moses, God revealed only the divine back, because Moses shouldn't/couldn't see God's face (33:20-23).

We should not see an off-putting word in this message of a mysterious, transcendent God. Although this part of the biblical portrayal of God communicates that God exists beyond our understanding, this message does not teach of a God who remains indifferent to us.

When the Old Testament talks about a God who cannot be seen, part of the implication of that message is that the transcendent God has power, sovereignty, and glory. We could not properly worship a God who was fully accessible to us. We expect God to be beyond our understanding.

Furthermore, a transcendent God has power to combat the evil in the world. The people of Israel understood God, in part, as a warrior who fought their enemies. We don't want to take that idea too far. God loves all the nations of the world and all people, even those who do not acknowledge God. The way we appropriate the image of God as warrior is God fighting the evil of the world. We need a strong God for that.

***How does the teaching of a transcendent God affect your faith? In what ways does such an image give you comfort in the face of the evil of the world? How do you understand the passages that talk about the danger of seeing God? How do those passages affect your faith?***

## **An Approachable God**

This passage balances the image of God as mysterious and transcendent with an image of God who allowed Moses and some of the leaders of Israel to come near and to see the divine presence. Exodus 24:9-11 describes the scene where the leaders saw the divine presence and the area around God. The leaders even ate a

meal in God's presence.

This seems to be a scene in which God bent the rules about people seeing the divine presence, which ordinarily led to death. This scene portrays a God who allowed people to approach.

We should not seek to understand how the people in the narrative can actually see God. Rather than try to explain events behind the text, we should look for the message about God in the passage.

This scene gives the flip side of the mysterious God that we also see in the rest of the narrative and in the scene in Chapter 19. We can never understand God; God lies beyond us, but this God allows us to come near (spiritually and emotionally) and even takes the initiative to reach out to us.

This image of an approachable God in Exodus fits with other narratives in Scripture. In Genesis 3, God walks in the garden in the cool of the evening. In Hosea 11, God loves the people of Israel as a parent loves a child, feeling the vulnerability of hurt. Jesus, of course, is Emmanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), and the one who "made his home among us" (John 1:14).

Although these two images of God (beyond us and near to us) sound paradoxical, either one without the other would distort God's character as the Bible portrays it. An approachable God who was not also transcendent would be weak. A transcendent God who was not approachable could not comfort us or hear our prayers. The mysterious God fills us with awe. The approachable God teaches us how to love and enables us to feel loved.

In a sermon for Trinity Sunday, the Lutheran pastor Edmund Steimle, speaking from Isaiah's Temple vision in Isaiah 6, wrote of God near and God far. Isaiah's Temple vision, of course, teaches of a God who wears a garment, the hem of which fills the Temple. Steimle wrote, "God in his nearness--when we are actually open to God in his nearness, incredibly reaching across a great chasm, a great gulf--makes



us conscious of his otherness, of his distance. Then the name of Jesus indeed sounds sweet in our ears."<sup>2</sup> Steimle makes the point that only when we understand God's transcendence do we fully appreciate that God reaches out to us, loves us, and wants to be in relationship with us.

***What keeps you from feeling close to God? How have you had trouble seeing God as approachable and near to you? What can you do to enable yourself to move past the things that prevent you from feeling God's nearness?***

## Obedience

Exodus 24 portrays a God powerful enough to elicit awe and approachable enough to allow people to experience the divine presence. This mysterious but approachable God then calls for obedience from the people. The divine character affects the call to obedience. We obey God because God displays power and accessibility. God's power commands our attention. God's love and nearness fill us with gratitude. Those responses are among the reasons why we obey God.

In Exodus 24, the narrator simply reports the response of the people to the call for obedience: "Everything that the LORD has said we will do" (Exodus 24:3). The whole group speaks as one character. They seem confident without hesitation that they could and would obey.

The reader may remember that in Chapter 16, the people received the command from the Lord not to save any food collected until the following day and to collect food only on the first six days of the week and to rest on the seventh day. The narrator then tells us that some of the people disobeyed and saved food until the next day, and some went out seeking bread on the seventh day (16:20, 27). In these cases, the people did not all act ethically as one body.

In the account of Exodus 24, the people sound over-confident about their

ability to obey God's commands. If we read ahead to Chapter 32, we discover that the people did not live up to their promise.

Social scientists have done studies that indicate people do not live up to their own expectations about their morality. One research project concluded, "People predict that they will behave more ethically than they actually do, and when evaluating past (un)ethical behavior, they believe they behaved more ethically than they actually did."<sup>3</sup>

When we look at our lives, we see some of the problems we have obeying God. We sometimes genuinely do not know the right thing to do. The biggest arguments in the church right now involve ethics, the response of obedience to the power and love of God. We tend to think we are better than we actually are. We can easily find excuses to cover up our sins. We may point to the sins of others to hide our own. We act out of neediness, and that leads us toward disobedience.

We cannot solve all of our issues with what obedience means, how to understand the teachings in the Old Testament about right and wrong. Some of the Old Testament laws still give us guidance, but we know that we do not follow every single law from the Torah--bacon and shrimp would be out of our diet! Nevertheless, we should study the Old Testament Law to learn what we can about how to love God and love our neighbor.

We start down the path toward ethical behavior by focusing on God's power and love. God is powerful enough that we can give our internal insecurities and hurts to God. God is approachable and loving enough that we can draw on that love to heal us and inspire us. The path toward ethical behavior is a teachable heart that recognizes the power and love of God. That recognition enables us to seek to understand how to choose what is right and gives us the strength to live it out.

We will not always succeed or get it right. In our lack of understanding and inability to live up to our own ideals, we seek forgiveness from God, and we learn

to forgive ourselves.

*In what situations have you not lived up to your own expectations about acting in an ethical way? When do you find your emotions interfering with your ability to act ethically? In what ways do you find healing in God's love and power.*

**O God, we fail ourselves, and we fail you. We think of ourselves as good people, but we don't always live up to our ideals or to the life to which you call us. Enable us to grasp your power and your love. Help us to seek and accept forgiveness; in Jesus' name. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *Luther*, by Scott H. Hendrix (Abingdon Press, 2009); page 20.

<sup>2</sup>From *God the Stranger: Reflections about Resurrection* (Fortress Press, 1979); page 50.

<sup>3</sup>From "The Ethical Mirage: A Temporal Explanation as to Why We Aren't as Ethical as We Think We Are," working paper, by Ann E. Tenbrunsel (Harvard Business School, 2009); page 2.