

How to Approach a Holy God

a sermon in the series
The Holiness of God

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Deuteronomy 18:15-17

The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die." And the LORD said to me: "What they have spoken is good."

We have explored a side of God that is often ignored, denied or misunderstood. We have shown that the holiness of God cannot be trifled with or considered lightly. His holiness can breakout against those who are careless in their approach and manner, including you and me.

In the New Testament Jesus had died and rose again. The early church was experiencing a great revival. Great grace was on them all. Hundreds were being converted. Miracles of kindness were happening on every hand. In the midst of this atmosphere of amazing charity and mercy Ananias and Sapphria thought they could lie to God and His church without penalty. Both were stricken in the midst of the worship service. Both were stricken in a worship service and both were carried out from the church that day—dead.

These past few weeks we have presented not just an Old Testament view of God. We have given you a biblical view of the Lord of glory. As a result of these messages I expect that we should be more of careful in attitude and fearful in our approach to the Almighty. I am sure if anyone has listened to these messages they could come away with the thought, "How can I ever approach One so holy? How can I dare enter His presence or why should I ever want to speak His name for fear of blasphemy?"

It is true that you and I could easily become unbalanced in our understanding of the Lord. We could see Him in light of His righteous judgment only and miss who God is. We could wrongly understand holiness only to be something dreaded. That would be wrong. But equally wrong and just as dangerous is another unbalanced view of God that most are plagued with. It is the predominant view of God in these evil days. This view sees God mainly, if not altogether, a God of forgiveness that is easy on sin because He is so full of love. Undoubtedly, this was more akin to Ananias and Sapphria's view of God. They had completely lost sight of (if they had ever had it) God's holiness. This wrong view causes people to be careless in His presence.

So how can we rightly remember that God is frighteningly holy, and at the same time realize

that we can come to Him? How do we reconcile what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, Uzzah, Nadab and Abihu, and some of these others that we have talked about the last few weeks with what the writer of Hebrews says in 4:16, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” How do you reconcile that? If you come with a casual heart, you could be stricken by that very holiness to which you are to come boldly.

God Is Unapproachable

That is what we will deal with today. I wish to direct your attention to the doctrinal fact that must be remembered in all that we say and do: God is unapproachable. He is so holy that no one can approach Him. He is literally the unapproachable Deity. This is still true about God; He has not changed. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:16 God “alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” Because God is unapproachable you cannot see Him. As Isaiah showed us, even the holiest angels could not dare behold such pure light, so with their wings they covered their eyes lest they look upon the Holy One seated upon the throne of heaven.

No creature is as holy as He is, and none shall ever be as holy! Not even you and I in heaven will be as holy as God. That leads to a question: in heaven, will we be able to see God the Father? Will we be able to approach Him seated on His glorious throne? The answer is, I don’t know. I really don’t know. Some passages of Scripture give me the indication that perhaps we will, but then there is this 1 Timothy verse that says “no man has seen or can see” the “unapproachable light.” So I can’t answer dogmatically one way or the other, but this I can say: God remains God. He has not changed, and His grace does not change Him. Grace changes you and me, not Him. Grace is an attribute of God, part of His nature. God is immutable, unchangeable. He is holy and remains holy, and none dare approach, evidently not even holy angels.

This fact leads me back to our text, Deuteronomy 18:16. Moses reminds Israel of their terrified response to God showing Himself as fire and smoke as He descended upon Mount Sinai, speaking audibly to them. They heard the very voice of God. The event must have been so soul-shattering, so frightening, that Moses is on the record as saying “I am exceedingly afraid and quake.” People were almost driven to madness by the sound of His voice. So they concluded that they couldn’t endure another moment like that ever again. If God were to reveal Himself to them one more time, they believed they would all die. So they go to Moses and say, “Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.” (They were speaking collectively here, “I” meaning the whole congregation of Israel.)

What is so fascinating is God’s response in verse 17. “And the LORD said to me (that is, to Moses): ‘What they have spoken is good.’” God commends them for their holy fear and their righteous conclusions, that they cannot suffer the voice of God and the demonstration of His glory anymore, lest they would die. Seeing God in the way they did revealed their unworthiness. Seeing God always does that to a person. You can’t catch a glimpse of God, even His love, and not be immediately rushed upon with a feeling of unworthy. He is that overwhelming.

The people of Israel saw themselves unfit to be in His presence, and therefore they surmised that they needed a mediator. So they said to Moses, “You go near and hear all that the Lord our God may say, and tell us all that the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it.” And the Lord said that they were right in that answer!

My immediate thought is “Why?” Why would the Lord approve of a desire that His people could not see Him or hear Him? I would think that the Lord God would want to be with His people, and they with Him, so they could interact with Him, and see and hear Him. He is better than any father here, and there is not one father here who does not want his children gathered around him or want them home this Christmas season. How could it be good that the people of God refuse to hear the voice of God? How could it be good that God would say they answered rightly?

God is Dangerous

The first answer is: it’s right because *God is dangerous*. This is the view of God we just do not like. It rubs us the wrong way and goes against the grain of much of what we have heard our entire lives, that God is not dangerous but loving. How could such a loving God be so dangerous? Yet He is exactly as C.S. Lewis portrays Him in his work of fiction, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It was asked whether the fictional lion, Aslan, was tame, and the answer was, “He’s not safe, but he’s good.” God isn’t safe, friends, but He is good.

In these last three messages, you have seen a God that is dangerous. Nadab and Abihu were in the temple offering incense, when fire fell from heaven and consumed them in the act of worship. Uzzah stabilized the Ark of the Covenant because he feared it would fall and be damaged. He was trying to protect the artifact of God, yet God struck him dead immediately. Uzziah, the great king who loved God, wanted to draw closer to God and do the work of the priest, and God struck him with leprosy. Even the holy man of God, Moses, incurred God’s judgment when he failed to obey God and give the Lord the glory for bringing water out of the rock. Holiness is dangerous to flawed men.

Insufferable Glory

The second answer is because God is so holy that He cannot reveal Himself in the brightness of His glory and we survive it. He is too good to reveal Himself totally to us. It is really His kindness that He does not. He cannot show Himself as He is and it not be hazardous for those to whom He reveals Himself. You and I cannot get a handle on God, so we get this constant, continual releasing or emitting of some glory, seasons here and seasons there interspersed between valleys of difficulty. We could not sustain continual full manifestation of all that He is. He is loving to withhold Himself from us in His totality.

When Moses asked to see the glory of the Lord, the Lord told him He would show him a portion of His glory, but he could not see all of it. He told Moses, “You cannot see My face for no man shall see Me and live.” This is the God whom we worship and serve: we cannot look on Him! He

is so pure, His purity would pierce my physical being and I could not sustain it. We cannot endure such fullness. Even now, we don't experience that fullness: it would disintegrate our bodies, short-circuit our mind. It is for our sake God does not unveil Himself and show us all there is to see of Him. These two reasons are why the Israelites were commended by God, and why we should be thankful for what we have been given and not more at this point.

The Necessity of a Mediator

Let me direct your attention to their request for another mediator. What is the solution for being able to enter into the presence of God? What is our remedy? We must come, for Scripture tells us to come boldly before the throne of grace with confidence. How can we, for when we dare come in a wrong way we are in trouble? I will answer that question in two parts, first answering how you may come boldly. The next message will show you how to come with fear as well as with boldness.

How do you approach an unapproachable God? By approaching Jesus Christ. Let's examine three things: first, God has approached us. We cannot go to Him, but He has come to you. Because He cannot be seen, God has made Himself visible. Since He is, as Paul described, dwelling in unapproachable light that no man has seen or can see, God has veiled His glory in human flesh. That's what we are celebrating this time of year. Not only could you not come near to God, you couldn't even see Him. So God came to You in the Person of Jesus. That is why this season is so radically important: God has come to us! Think of it! God has come to every last one of you! I care not what your background is, or how much money you make, or what your sins are, God has come to you! It is sad that in our ignorance and blindness we didn't even recognize it. Even now, God comes to us and often we see it not.

Look again at verse 18: this is exactly what God promised through Moses. "I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren..." God does not mean Jesus is like Moses in all respects: Moses sinned and was a fallen man, Jesus was perfect and did not sin. But in the sense that Moses was truly human, so would Christ be. He goes on to say, "like you from among their brethren." I love those words! Jesus is not only like us, he is also one of us. One of our brethren. He continues: "And will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him." For any of you who do not know that Jesus Christ is eternal Deity, I wish to take a few moments to explain what that means. Let me warn you, you will not understand it fully: you will hear it but you won't understand it.

Before the virgin delivered the Christ child in Bethlehem's stable, God the Son existed eternally. He existed way before Bethlehem and the story that we now celebrate. He is eternal God, self-existent, always. How do we comprehend that the Christian God, the God of the Bible, is Trinitarian in essence? The Bible reveals God to be only one God, but He exists in three Persons. How do you understand that? You don't! But because the Word of God says it, it is so. We do not worship three Gods; the Bible is clear that there is one God. But one God exists in three Persons, beyond human understanding. One God comprised of three Persons. This is our God.

This one God wanted to reveal Himself to Adam's fallen race. How could He do that and not destroy the race? How does God who is unapproachable declare Himself? He descends on Sinai in smoke and fire. He reveals himself in smoke, fire, lightening, thunder, quaking of the earth, and people were scared to death. What if He were to come as He really is, in the purity and beauty of His holiness, in the glory of heaven, unbridled and unveiled pure holiness? The earth could not sustain it; it would crumble under the pressure of such power and glory. How does He then come? The answer happened in Bethlehem. God came to us in the Person of a Son; the second Person in the Godhead became a human being. That doesn't mean He put on a human suit and looked like a man. It doesn't mean he morphed Himself into the appearance of a man while He was on earth. No, this was a real Man. God was conceived in the womb of a virgin and literally became a man! He nestled Himself in the womb of Mary and developed as any unborn child would until the time of delivery. He is thoroughly Man.

Doctor Luke says when the days were completed for Mary to deliver, she brought forth her firstborn Son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, for there was no room for them at the inn. Once again, beyond human comprehension, God the Second Person of the Trinity, the Eternal Son, became a human being in every sense of the word while retaining every ounce of Deity. He was fully God and fully man. But God becoming a man didn't resolve the issue of man approaching God.

A problem stands in our way of approaching the Lord. We all have it. The problem is sin. I have it; you have it. In fact, I still have a sin problem, and so do you. You still need saving from your sins. So, because of the sin problem, even Jesus Christ the Man could not abide with sinful men. Just because He becomes a man doesn't mean He can tolerate sin any better; He is no less holy as a man than He was in the eternal ages with the Father and the Holy Spirit. What man deserved to be in His presence? Which of the apostles merited the privilege to dwell and abide in the presence of the Son of God? Which of them had earned the right to dwell with God veiled in flesh? None of them, and none of us! I am still not worthy to be in His presence! How great a mercy, for this God who would let filthy, vile rebels even spend a precious second in His holy presence. This is amazing that His kindness, His pity would be such that He would allow one of them to recline upon His bosom as the Apostle John. That was great grace.

But He could love and forbear sinners because of what He did on a small hill outside of Jerusalem. There, in the same vicinity where Abraham had offered up his son Isaac, God – offered up on twisted timber, veiled in flesh. God, Incarnate Deity, Son of Man, Son of God was lifted up and died as our sin-bearer. There, nailed to the cross, is my Hope of knowing God! He suffered the wrath that Israel feared on Mount Sinai. He suffered it and received in your place the penalty of the law and its curse. There is no record of sin against you today, dear friend. Rejoice all ye saints, for there is none who can bear charge and accuse you, for He has wiped the debt that you owed and He took it upon Himself, for those of you who will commit to trusting Him, this God-man.

Holy sentries who stand at the stairs of heaven's imperial throne guarding its approach cannot let any pass whose garments are stained with sin. They cannot suffer any whose hands are red with

blood from the blood of others. There they stand and cannot permit anyone to climb those holy and sacred stairs leading to that throne of grace – not one! Not even one whose only mark is a single sin: they cannot let him approach this royal and holy place where God is seated.

But if you have faith in Jesus, the God-man, the same question that will bar the masses will let you in: “You who desire audience with the King – does anyone lay a charge of sin against you?”

You who have laid your life down and put your confidence in the hands of Jesus can answer, “No, not one. None can lay a charge against me, for who can lay a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies,”

Because of their sacred duty they press yet more: “Do you mean to tell me that there is none who condemns you?”

You can say boldly, “There is none who condemns me! For Christ has died and then risen again; furthermore He is at the right hand of God making intercession for us.” With that, their weapons are laid down. You are allowed to pass and climb the stairs leading to a throne of grace to help in time of need.

The sin problem has been dealt with; you can come to God, all of you! Sinners, those of you not yet Christians, come! The Spirit and the Bride say to you, come! The Way has been made; access has been provided through Jesus Christ! Why will you not come? It is a mystery I cannot fathom, why anyone would sit and not run to the cross this day. Why would you remain in your sins and hold them tightly and not be free of them at this very moment? Do you think your sins can keep you from God when there has been One who has paid for those sins? His blood can wash you and make you white as snow. Don’t doubt it, my friend. The power of the blood is able to bring you into the very presence of God; holy angels will back out of your way to give you access. Will not one of you, at this moment, take advantage of this word I am giving you and come?

Would you not see God standing with arms open and saying, “Look into My face, and see the nail prints in My hands; they are your admittance! Come!” What sin will stand between you and those nail-printed hands? None, for all handwriting and ordinance of the law has been wiped away. There is none that stands against all who believe, all who trust, all who rest. Oh, what a gospel! You are allowed because of this Christ Jesus; He is the reason for this possibility, but this is not all.

You could not approach Him. But He, in Christ Jesus, approached you. You need not wait. How foolish it is to sit and say, “Well, if God wants to save me this morning, He must make me to feel something or give me some sign.” Sign? Sign! What do you think Calvary and Christ’s death is? What do you think an empty tomb is if not a sign that you can come?

Secondly, Jesus makes God approachable. God approaches us in Jesus, but Jesus makes God approachable. If sinless angels cannot look upon Him, how can forgiven saints look upon Him? Having our sins removed doesn’t make us qualified to look upon Him; the fact remains, God is

unapproachable for the simple fact He is just too mighty, too great, too holy, for any to go near Him. For this reason, to know God in His fullness would just be too much to bear for any creature, sinless or otherwise. We still can't look upon Him. The solution is that God made Himself of no reputation; He became one of us in the incarnation.

Notice how the Apostle Paul says this in 1 Timothy 3:16 – “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.” It is a mystery, and no one is going to argue that point (it is without controversy). Can you understand God in flesh? No, not even Paul could understand it. Yet it is true. A mystery but true, God manifested Himself in the flesh and made Himself available without doing harm to those who would draw near to Him. I think the apostle John has this very same thought in mind when he writes in the prologue of the first chapter of his gospel, John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” Let me tell you what John is doing. He is contrasting the apostles' sighting of God with Moses' sighting of God on Mount Sinai. You will remember Moses had prayed to see the fullness of the glory of God, but wasn't permitted to do so for his own safety. John says that he and the other apostles saw the fullness of God's glory in the Son. What Moses saw was good, but what they saw was better – they got it all!

Look at verses 16-18. Notice the contrast between the apostles and Moses: “And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” Do you see that? What the apostles saw in the veiled flesh of Jesus Christ was full God – nothing held back. Jesus was all of God in human flesh. So, Jesus is approachable.

Thirdly and lastly, Jesus makes God knowable. You can really know God now, whereas you really couldn't beforehand. The prophets of old foretold things of which they inquired of themselves, “What does this mean?” “Who is this One that God has given us glimpses of that will yet one day come?” “Who is this that even the Gentiles shall rejoice in the light they see?” But they didn't understand it – they only received guarded glimpses.

We have seen in Christ the fullness of the glory, because Jesus makes God knowable. That is the whole point of the writer to the Hebrews, who said, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things.” He is talking here about the Man Christ Jesus, because the eternal Son of God who is preexistent to Bethlehem and the manger story was already heir of all things, for He made all things. But the Man Christ Jesus did not exist until He was conceived in the womb of Mary and was born on this day we celebrate. It was that Man whom God has appointed now heir of all things, the Man Christ Jesus.

But He doesn't stop there. He wants to make sure that your doctrine is right, that your Christology is accurate – that you understand He is not only fully man as if not God, but He is also fully

God as if not man. He goes on to say, “He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” What a Savior!

Fully God, fully Man. And now He is the Mediator, the God-Man mediator for me. I know that I may be leaving you in deep waters, deeper than you care to swim this day. We can't comprehend a God so holy, so separate from us. We can't fathom such pure light. We can't look at Him in His complete, full regalia. But veiled in flesh we can behold! We can see what God is like when we look at Jesus the Man. We can see holiness in action – man was able to see what the law could only illustrate and point to, what those prophets prophesied. But we see it because we have a point of reference—humanity, the humanity of Christ Jesus. I can't relate to God because He is not like me – He is not an angel, nor a man. He is God. I can't relate to that, but I can relate to a Man. I can know a Man. And He became a Man – Deity veiled in flesh. Earlier we sang Wesley's hymn, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” The veiling of Deity, as Charles Wesley says about Him, allowed men to behold the Deity.

It is much like Moses' veil. When Moses finally came down from Mount Sinai after experiencing the glory of God, the Bible says his face was so radiant from the residue of that glory is that people couldn't even look into his face. It was blinding! The only way to interact with Moses was for him to put a covering over his face. The veil made him approachable. The veiling of Deity in human flesh made God approachable. The glory that would consume you in judgment has been veiled in human form, and now you can approach Him. You can understand Him.

The writer of Hebrews says something so profound that impacts our Deuteronomy 18 text. Hebrews 10:19-20 says, “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way –” I cherish those sweet words! New, never before had this happened! And it is a living way, not some ritual or religious thing! This is a Person, a living Way! “– which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.” The writer answers our question of how we can come boldly: it is by the humanity of Christ, who made the way to God accessible.

What was the purpose of the veil in the temple, that massive curtain that hung between the Holy of Holies and the rest of the temple? It protected the way to the Ark of the Covenant. Its purpose was to hide the presence of God from a viewing world. The veil was to cover.

God is accessible only through the veil of Jesus' humanity. The only way to God is through the Man, Christ Jesus! He, like the curtain of the temple, veils unsafe glory. He hid within His person the pure, eternal holiness of deity. But like the veil of the temple that was torn in two when Jesus died, signifying access to God was now available, so was our Lord's body torn with nails and javelin; His body was broken, and through His broken body, we can now come boldly. To come any other way does Him disservice and honors Him not. Come boldly, sir! Claim the blood of Christ! Claim the broken veil of God! Therefore the only way to come to this dangerous, holy

God is through Christ, which means acknowledge Him as Lord, Savior and King. Would you come to God? Don't be so flippant as to say, "I can come when I want and in the way I see fitting." Oh, no. All of those things are an indictment: they are rude and they are a blight to God. They will not make your way to God – they will close your way! Come to Christ! Don't just say, "Jesus is Lord," but treasure Him! Follow Him for He is the only way to God!

You must be a terribly miserable person to not know what life is – to have tasted eternal God in all glory, a power so mighty and great that none can dare stand in it! Yet God offers it to you in the person of Christ! How deceived must one be to think that his present life and condition is better than service to this King? Come through Jesus Christ and Him alone.

Christian, if our only way to God is through the Man Christ Jesus, should not that tell you that you should not fear to come to God. You should not fear to come unless you try to come through a different way other than Christ. Never should we bow the knee in prayer that we first don't acknowledge the blood of the Man and Mediator, the Savior Jesus Christ. This is where I get uncomfortable, when we pray flippantly without acknowledging the very blood that gives us access and makes it possible that we can pray. It is wrong to begin prayers not acknowledging the blood and death of the Lord, and we prance right into the presence of the Lord as if we are fitted for that place because of who we are. We are nothing but in Christ, in Christ, in Christ we are accepted.

Acknowledge Christ when you come to the Father. Our goodness will not permit access; our religious duties will not open the way to God, but the blood of the Lamb of God opens all doors and breaks all barriers.

As I conclude, God the Father remains unapproachable light, but He has become real to us in the Son. I can think of no better way to honor the Son but to avail ourselves of the way He has opened up to us, the way to God. No greater worship than to come to God. The very act of coming honors Him the most. Let us enter and be saved! Amen.