

## A Godly Fear

Exodus 20:18-21

What does God say after giving the ten commandments?

That's a fascinating question. What else can God say after that momentous occasion when he spoke to his people from Mt. Sinai? What is it that we should learn after the ten commandments?

Remember back to the introduction to these commandments, with the preface which we studied in some detail,

Ex. 20:2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

That sets the context for the whole study of these laws which were given to God's people after they had been redeemed out of the land of Egypt, out of bondage. These laws were given to God's people as a redeemed people. God saved them, by grace. He established them to be his own special treasure, his own covenant people, and then he gave them the law. That is so important, for it demonstrates that the law was not given by Moses as a covenant of works. It shows how the people of Israel did not become the people of God by the performance of their own obedience to the law. This giving of the law is in the broader context of the covenant of grace, as the will of God for the lives of his people, how they should demonstrate their loving gratitude to him for the salvation which he has accomplished for them.

All the duties of the law, all the requirements, all the prohibitions and sins we can identify are given in that context--everything is a description and definition of how we love the God who has so graciously saved us and redeemed us from the curse and bondage of our sins.

So, then, what comes next? Still in that context of a loving, faithful covenant God speaking graciously to his redeemed people, what do we find next?

v.18

We also read in,

v.21

All of that is very understandable. And the key point there is that,

### I. GOD SPEAKS IN TRANSCENDENT GLORY.

Transcendent means something that goes beyond you or me, something outside of us, something bigger than us. And I fear that most people today react against thoughts of a transcendent God. People react negatively when God is conceived of in terms that is bigger than their own needs and feelings. Typically, people today want a very small god with whom they can feel comfortable, one who is actually quite like themselves, a god fashioned perhaps in their own image.

So we want to approach God in a casual manner, and that is certainly reflected in the casual and informal style of worship so commonplace today. Any expression of honor or reverence is considered to be merely traditional, passé, outdated and unhelpful.

But God does not present himself here at Mt. Sinai in a comfortable, casual manner. Here we have authority and power shown forth--in sound and light. Thunderings, lightnings. And if that weren't enough, trumpets and smoking mountains! Don't forget, beloved, these things are real. These aren't presented to us as poetic images or illustrations of what the people felt. These are descriptions of the glorious revelation of God to his people.

We are all used to thunder and lightning--not such a big deal. But then again, it really is. Even the normal, ordinary storms we experience are awe-inspiring, aren't they? Even fearful, something before which to stand in awe in view of the power and majesty of the whole thing.

Even so, I don't conceive of this storm as ordinary! This was God showing forth his glory, speaking his voice, as is so often mentioned in Scripture, by thunder. Job's true friend, Elihu, had it right, when he speaks of God with these words,

Job 37:1 "At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place. 2 Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. 3 Under the whole heaven he lets it go, and his lightning to the corners of the earth. 4 After it his voice roars; he thunders with his majestic voice, and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard. 5 God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend."

And then God's musical instrument of choice, the trumpet. All of that is,

#### **A. The sound of power.**

And that is exactly the point. Impressive power, to say the very least. That's how God shows himself.

Do you remember when Moses went up the mountain to receive those ten commandments,

Ex. 19:16 "Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai

was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. 19 And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. 20 Then the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up."

The same recipe. Thunders, lightning. A trumpet. And smoke from the mountain. With fire. And now, according to verse 21, thick darkness. There is so clearly implied in all of this,

#### **B. The sound of authority.**

David understands that, too.

Ps. 29:3 "The voice of the LORD is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The LORD is over many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; The voice of the LORD is full of majesty. 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. 7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh. 9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, "Glory!"

All of that speaks of God's authority. Authority demonstrated by thunders, lightning, smoke, darkness, and a trumpet. That's how God chooses to reveal himself to his people. And the people respond appropriately,

#### **II. GOD'S PEOPLE RESPOND WITH APPROPRIATE HUMILITY.**

They stood far off.

v.21

With good reason,

v.18b "...when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off."

Those are interesting words, very hard words for us to grasp today. Actually, by and large we don't want to grasp them today. We don't want to see God in these terms. We consider all of this to be out of date, perhaps even abrogated or put to an end within the whole context of the Old Testament. After all, we don't see God this way in the New Covenant. And even with our reformed understanding of the covenant of grace beginning immediately after the fall in Genesis 3, still we think this is an exception.

Sadly, all too many people see the whole of the law in that context as well. They see it as part of the temporary shadows of the Old Covenant. No longer the subject of our focus and study in the New Testament. And there are verses that seem to encourage us to think that way, such as,

Heb. 12:18 "For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." 21 And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.") 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus

the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

So fear and trembling are not appropriate expressions of a response to God any longer, are they? After all, you didn't come to Mt. Sinai, but to city of the living God, the heavenly city. You didn't come to Mt. Sinai but to Jesus! So God has changed, many would say. The revelation of God has changed, so they say. The demonstration of the glory of God has changed, so they say!

But that's not what Hebrews 12 says! Yes, there are dramatic improvements and advancements in the revelation of God to us in the New Covenant. Yes, thankfully, we don't have to worship God at a mountain over in the middle east, with visions of fire and smoke. But look at what the writer of the letter of Hebrews does. Instead of casting aside this vision of God as old and outdated, actually the change is to intensify it!

Heb. 12:25 "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, 26 whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 27 Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire."

The book of Hebrews uses the same language as Exodus. So the response to God, then and now, ought to be the same. For God is always and unchangeably the same. Therefore what we

learn from our text in Exodus is that we ought to approach God with,

### **A. Fear and awe.**

Just like the Old Covenant people of God. And the word fear is often translated reverence. That is the focus. And that is what is described in,

v.18

But what exactly does that mean? Does fear and awe mean the dread apprehension of God as a cruel taskmaster or evil tyrant? Certainly not. More pointedly, does it mean that you should hesitate or be restrained from approaching God? And here, again, the clear answer is no!

Heb. 4:14 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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.”

We have the privilege of access, the boldness of confidence to approach God, but without losing this sense of fear and awe! And that is where Jesus is so central to the whole message, for without him, the fear and awe would be the dread apprehension of a convicted criminal preparing for his day of sentencing! We, on the other hand, as the people of God, approach our father who loves us and has redeemed us with the blood of Jesus!

So what do we do? Get casual and comfortable with God? Absolutely not. With fear and awe, we come to him in faith! To be received because he promised to receive us in Christ. So with that fear and awe is gratitude. Remember the end of Hebrews 12

I read a few moments ago, making the comparison of the people of God today with those at Mt. Sinai.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

God is still a consuming fire, still his transcendent glory shines forth, therefore what matters is that offer to God acceptable worship. And acceptable worship today, just as did was at Mt. Sinai, requires reverence and awe! So people of God, consider the glory of God in this text from Exodus 20. Behold your God, the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Behold his glory. Meditate upon it. In the simplicity of the New Covenant, it would be inappropriate for me to attempt to recreate this exact scene from Mt. Sinai, so I won't blow a trumpet or send out smoke, and surely I can't command the thunder and lightning. But look upon those things, dear ones, and behold your God!

Notice something else about these covenant people of God, and remember, that is who they are. The people God has redeemed from the house of bondage by his own mercy and grace. Notice their,

### **B. Alienation and guilt.**

The people of God were painfully conscious of the guilt of their sins. That's why they stood far off.

v.19

There was a reason for that. Moses learned that explicitly when he asked to see God's glory and was given but a glimpse,

Ex. 33:20 But, [God] said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”

There is a reason for that, the same reason Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden of Eden AFTER the fall. The reason is sin.

Gen. 3: 6 “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” 11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked?”

Why, their guilt told them. Their shame. That’s what sin does. And that is the appropriate response to have when you come into God’s presence to worship him. Do you remember Isaiah when he beheld the glory of God?

Is. 6:5 “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Alienation and guilt is appropriate in the presence of God. But again, not without hope of forgiveness. Indeed, not with the full confidence and assurance of forgiveness. Which is why Moses responds in verse 20, “Do not fear.”

But fallen, sinful man cannot see God and live, and you ought never to forget that. Thus the words of the people to Moses, v.19 “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”

But that’s what prompted Moses to say, “Do not fear.” You see, despite our sinfulness, still God does speak to us. And he still does today! Through his written word, made alive within our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. God speaks to us, and we live! That’s really the message of this text.

### **III. GOD SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE WITH COVENANT MERCY.**

Consider the second time these commandments are given, recorded in Deuteronomy 5. Moses says to the people of Israel, Deut. 5:24 “And you said: ‘Surely the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives. 25 Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God anymore, then we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? 27 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.’ 28 “Then the LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me: ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken.

And then God speaks so clearly in his mercy,

Deut. 5:29 “Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!”

God praises his people for their reverence! And as we see in our text from Exodus 20, he gives them a test. And beloved, this is crucial, a test is not a judgment. A test from God is not judicial trial to determine your guilt or innocence before the law. A test is

a teacher teaching his students. A test is a father or mother nurturing their children. A test is an opportunity to learn. This test of God is a good thing! God tests us to see if we will honor him and, therefore, obey him. God tests you to purify your faith, yea even to build your faith! God tests you to make you strong and complete. It is presented to us here as,

**A. A test of honor.**

An opportunity, to honor God. To bring all of this back to our contemporary experiences, I fear that this is a test so many of God's people today desperately need. They need to gain a great sense of the honor that is due to God.

v.20

That's the application of this passage for us today, as well. That's the test God has for us today, and every day--that the fear of God may be before you. That's the purpose for my preaching the way I am this afternoon, that you will honor God and worship him with reverence and awe.

And how do you show forth that reverence? How do you show that you do, indeed, honor God? I hope you know the answer. By obeying his commandments.

Let me repeat it again, so you don't have any reason to misunderstand me. This test was given by God to his covenant people. That is to say, it is given to those people who are already established in a covenant relationship with God. They are already redeemed. Already saved. Already justified. Already freed from the condemnation of the law. Already adopted. Already identified as the beloved, God's own special treasure, a people for his own possession. None of those things is being called into question. Not for them. Not for us.

So with all of those things made sure and certain by the finished work of Jesus Christ, how do you who trust in God for your eternal salvation honor this God who has saved you? Obedience to his revealed will, the moral law, summarized comprehensively by these ten commandments. And so, this is,

**B. A test of covenant faithfulness.**

v. 20 "...so that you may not sin."

That's is covenant faithfulness. This test does not contradict the gospel, any more than the Apostle John contradicts the gospel. Indeed, this is the gospel, for he writes,

1 John 1:9 (p.1301) "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

And then the very next verse,

1 John 2:1 "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."

That's the same test that Moses identifies, isn't it?

v.20

So I preach the word of God to you so that you may not sin! I teach you the ten commandments that you may not sin. I encourage you to read the Bible, and in particular the duties and obligations of the moral law of God, so that you may not sin! That's why God gave the commandments to us as his covenant people. Not as a covenant of works wherein we would earn or merit his favor. No, he loves us as a father. Now, in his fatherly love, he challenges us by saying to us, "Will you love me?" "Will you honor me?" And, "Will you show me your love and honor by your obedience!" As John puts it,

1 John 2:1 "My little children, I am writing these things to you

so that you may not sin.”

John then completes that test.

1 John 2:1b “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”

What a glorious gospel balance! From Mt. Sinai.

That’s why you ought to examine yourself before partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Not because your salvation is in jeopardy, but because God calls you unto obedience, that you might not sin. But oh the depths of his grace, for in calling you to honor him by obeying his law, he has given us Jesus, an advocate. He has provided us with a propitiation--the penalty of his justice is paid. And now, beloved, now, we still can’t see God with our eyes, but we can see him by faith. For here, here we are at his invitation to share a fellowship meal with him.

We come to him with fear and trembling, and he invites us to sit at his table for a banquet. And so, on God’s behalf, I invite you to his dinner table, that you who are united to Jesus Christ might enjoy the unimaginable privilege of communion with God through this sacrament which he has ordained for that very purpose.

So here, at this communion table we come...

Heb. 12:24 “...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel...28Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.”