

EXODUS 19:7-25 2-11-18

Thunder on Sinai

Please follow as I read God's word starting at verse 7-22 *So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord. 9 The Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord. 10 The Lord also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; 11 and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. 13 No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." 14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. 15 He said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." 16 So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. 19 When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. 20 The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. 21 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish. 22 Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, or else the Lord will break out against them."*

We shall stop there. One morning I went out to the beach for a special time of prayer and there and then read this passage. I was so blown away by the vision of God we get here, so refreshed, so cleansed from all my worries, that I developed a special affection for this chapter. Two weeks later I became keenly aware of an irritation in my soul. The night before we had a

Session meeting and, as sometimes occurs, the meeting riveted my thoughts on all the problems in the church. When that occurs I experience this gnawing anxiety growing within and I know the only way to handle it is to give it all to God, to look squarely in His wonderful face and let Him renew my perspective and my hope. So, I knelt beside my sofa and opened up this chapter and let God speak to me thru it. So, I love this chapter and I hope at least a portion of what I experienced can be related to you.

There are three things I hope to bring you from this Scripture, three spiritual needs you and I have to which we do well to give attention. For the good of your soul come with me today and notice first of all our need to know God rightly – our need to know God rightly. I get a sense from reading Exodus and especially from reading this chapter that we need so much to see God as He is portrayed in this book. We may grow by reflecting on the God of the burning bush and the God who parts the sea and the God who thunders from Sinai. All of the Bible is a revelation of the character and nature and mind of God but there are certain select portions in which God sort of pulls back the veil separating earth and heaven and we are allowed a greater glimpse of His majesty. The book of Revelation permits us such a glance into the courts of divine glory. Isaiah 6 is another such passage. There we read Isaiah's vision of the divine majesty and there are some fascinating similarities to Exodus 19. Isaiah tells of the foundations of heaven trembling, and the temple filling with smoke from the fire of God's holiness. Isaiah was blown away by this vision of heaven. And what we see happening in Exodus 19 is the transportation of what Isaiah saw down to earth. In our text God descends to Mt. Sinai and brings with him all the accoutrements of His glory and the special effects which communicate to man the nature of God.

Consider this from the first chapter of AW Tozer's book, "The Knowledge of the Holy." It's a bit long, but I will save you having to read the whole book, okay?

"What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any time may say or do, but what he, in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God....This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the

church. Always, the most revealing thing about the church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him...Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "what comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the church will stand tomorrow....A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse...All the problems of heaven and earth, though they were to confront us together at once, would be nothing compared with the overwhelming problem of God. That he is; what He is like; and what we as moral beings must do about Him....The heaviest obligation lying upon the church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him – and of her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place.

You talk about something ringing true in someone's heart. I read that and wanted to shout, "Yes, yes, yes." Each one of us desperately needs an encounter with the God of Sinai that would shatter our apathy and break through our casual religiosity and vain self-sufficiency. One of the saddest misconceptions I know of is the notion the devil has foisted on so many that the study of theology, the doctrine of God, is not a practical thing and of no real value for real world people. Fact is that everything you do or say flows out of and reflects your view of God, and if you want any lasting genuine change in your life it will have to flow out of an altered view of God. You need to know it now if you don't already that all we have read from Exodus 19 is the prelude to Exodus 20 and the giving of the 10 Commandments. Now those are practical aren't they? I mean there you get some dos and don't dos. But, my friend, without knowing God you are completely powerless to keep His law. Do you see that what happened before the giving of the law affected the people's thinking about that law? Do you think an experience like we read of in chapter 19 would impact your attitude toward God's law? Learning the character of God is an intensely practical exercise. As Tozer says, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." For those of you familiar with the ministry of our late brother, RC Sproul, this is what drove him. This was his burden because he saw the same thing Tozer did. The most enduring Christian book of my generation, *Knowing God*, by JI Packer is written from the exact same burden. Knowing God will remain a Christian classic because when people make the effort to read

it they discover it addresses a need which is little felt on their emotional surface but goes to the very core of their being. This is why the prophet Hosea would say in 6:**3a** *So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord.*

Secondly, and a related point, we could use some mountaintops in our spiritual journeys. There are times we need to go up to the mountain. Sometimes there are benefits of the wilderness, and Exodus affirms that. There are corners of our soul made strong only in dry places and hard times, but woe to the man who never gets to the mountain. Do you know what I'm talking about? I'm talking about those special times with God. I'm talking about moments with God when His presence is more real than the nose on your face. I'm talking about times of heart-pounding, exhilarating worship when you feel that your heart will burst out of love for God or out of awe at His majesty. It can happen on a mountain, or at the beach or in a church, or on a retreat or in the office on Tuesday morning. I think it happened her two Sundays ago as our sister was reading Isaiah 6. Beth was standing next to me praying for the Holy Spirit to fall, and Gayla entered a new place in her spiritual vision as she read God's word. These are times when God comes down. That is what verse 20 talks about. **20ab** *The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain.* God was about to show His glory to Moses. He can do that in a number of ways. He can do it with thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and earthquakes. He can show his glory by the beauty of creation. Mountaintop experiences are called mountaintop experiences in part because of what Moses went thru and maybe also because mountaintops have been the scene for many such encounters with God. When we take in the immense beauty of what God has made we are often gripped by the immense beauty of God himself. The place is really beside the point. Some locations are nicer than others, but God may come down to you wherever you come up to Him. It can happen at your place. It can happen in your car. You don't have to get away physically but you do have to get away mentally. Mountaintop experiences do not generally happen for the excessively busy. You have to create space for God on your calendar and He's not what you would call a squeaky wheel, if you know what I mean. You have to push aside the pressing concerns of your day and zero in on God and let all of your problems melt before the heat of His holiness and His power. That is part of what happens when God comes down. **20ab** *The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain.* Look what He does next. **20cd** *The Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.* God Almighty called for Moses. And Moses didn't even bother to check his Google calendar, he went up. What about you? Do you think it possible that God has been calling

you to come up to the mountain and talk with Him, and you have been too busy for God? Too busy doing ___? What is your preferred distraction? Or maybe too scared? Scared? Yes, scared. The people in Israel were terrified of God. What might He do to them? Are you that way? You know some guy who went off to a retreat two years ago and came back a fanatic. One guy you know even threw away his television and that scares you to death. And you probably ought to be a little afraid. God does some incredible things when we go up to Him.

Now, most of us don't get to live on the mountain. God has designed that we live in the valley. And if our times on the mountain don't prepare us to live in the valley they have no lasting value. Maybe you know someone who had some rapturous spiritual experience at a retreat or conference or missions trip. They were all aglow about it for a while, but their lives never changed. What good was the trip to the mountain? If all they are is great emotional thrills why bother? In chapter 19 Moses meets with God on the mountain and in chapter 20 God tells Moses how to live in the valley. Here's the point, the mountaintop experience, to be of lasting value, has to be translated into a daily detailed disciplined obedience in the valley. That's the test of any spiritual experience.

So, what are you going to do? Will you make yourself available to God, so that when He calls you to the mountain you are ready to go? Will you set aside time in your schedule for retreats, or conferences or special times alone with God? Will you be committed to disciplines of prayer and Bible Study? Will you be at church with consistency. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues that you should not miss church because you never know when revival will break out and you don't want to miss it.

The third thing you and I need so very much is to fear the Lord, to have a healthy fear of His power and holiness that would move us to obey His law. It was precisely this kind of awe and fear that God was out to produce in His people by the lightning and thunder and the volcanic trembling of the mountain. **16** *So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.* 20:**18-20** *All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. 19 Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."* That is God's purpose in all the fireworks on Sinai.

It was intended to put the fear of God in these people. You can imagine the effect it would have had on you. You would have been right in there trembling with the rest of the people. When we encounter that kind of cosmic rumbling it reminds us who we are dealing with. It reminds us how frail and vulnerable we are. Little kids who are sassing their parents one minute will hear that thunder and crawl under their legs. It has a way of knocking the pride right out of you. That's why I go to places like the grand canyon, to remember how great God is and how small we are, and how small our problems are to Him. Jonathan Edwards, in fact, loved thunderstorms for the same reason. In His memoirs (p. xiii) he writes: *Scarce any thing among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning: formerly nothing had been so terrible to me. I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, but now it rejoiced me. I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm, and used to take opportunity to see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunders which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.* If thunder and lightning and earthquakes do nothing else they remind us of God's awesome power and show us how foolish it is to oppose His will. Remember when God did this. The when tells us the why. This is his prelude for the proclamation of His law. It was a law declared with emphasis! Can you fathers relate to what God is doing here? There are times when you want to impress upon your children the seriousness of some command, so you say it in such a way as to put a little fear in them. You may curl your lip and furrow your brow. Why you have even been known to increase your volume. And you say, "You had better never, ever, take the remote control again." You say it that way and you get no backtalk. They hear and they do, because they are afraid – a little. Does God do that? Yeah, God does that. Not to keep us from remote controls but to keep us from soul-destroying behaviors.

So, the understanding of God's law came to Israel by what God said. Their attitude about the law came by how God said it. And God really has a way of getting the point across, doesn't He? Do you think the thunder on Sinai affected their attitude towards the law? You can be sure it shut their mouths and opened their ears. God said he wanted them to fear him so they would not sin. He wanted them to hear and do without bickering and compromise and the only way that happens is when we have a holy fear of an awesome God who is Himself a consuming fire. Andrew Bonar said, "It is not the importance of the thing, but the majesty of the lawgiver, that is to be the standard of obedience." You see, in our small minded arrogance we can inwardly debate the merit of obeying some law. We can talk ourselves into believing that some of God's commands are too

trifling to be worth our time and effort. But when you are gripped by the majesty of God you will not despise any of His commands because you realize that you are not just obeying His rules you are obeying Him.

In theological terms we say we must find a balance between the ideas of transcendence and imminence, between God with us and the God who is Out there. It is possible to become overly familiar with God. Many in our day speak of God as the Good Buddy in the sky. They think God is just real neat and I wonder if they have read this. 20:**18** *All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.* And that was okay because what had God told them? Don't touch the mountain. Why not? The command not to touch the mountain upon penalty of death was to reinforce two truths: (1) God is holy. (2) You are not. You can see for yourself that both God and the Hebrews were afraid that if they got too close they could die. 20:**19** *They said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."* Why the fear? What were they afraid of? You may say the power of God and you would be half right. But they were also terrified of His holiness. All over the Scriptures we find people responding with terror in the presence of God and every time that terror was joined with a sense of moral uncleanness and filth. Peter says to Jesus, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man." The fear we experience in the presence of God is a fear of His Holy Mightiness and His mighty Holiness. Holiness is God's complete freedom from revulsion to and opposition against all sin. And because God is holy the people were told to consecrate themselves, to make themselves ceremonially pure by washing their clothes and abstaining from sex. Even then they had to stay back didn't they? The message: God is holy. Stand in awe of Him. Live in fear of Him and obey His law out of a grateful heart of love and devotion.

Psalm 24:**3-4a** *Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart.* Now that's pretty clear isn't it? You can't do business with a holy God unless you yourself are what? Holy. So, where does that leave you today? Maybe you are thinking, "Man, if that is what God is like I'm in big trouble." You'll get no argument from me. Sinners are in big trouble with God. When Isaiah had that vision of God in Isaiah 6 he said, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of host." We are in big trouble. And that big trouble is the very reason why Jesus Christ became a man and died on a cross. The law of God condemns every man who sins. Nobody can

stand before the God of Sinai in his own merits. Nobody! When you see your God and yourself rightly, when you see the condemnation of Sinai then you are ready for the good news of Jesus Christ which says, Romans 8:1-3 (NLT) *So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. 2 And because you belong to Him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. 3 The Law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.* In other words, the law had no power to make a man holy. The law could only expose our sin. To get right with God what do we need according to Psalm 24? We need our hands washed, that is, we need forgiveness of our guilt. That's what the cross is all about. Mt. Calvary, where Jesus died in the place of sinners, Mt. Calvary is set in the shadow of Mt. Sinai. A hymn I love puts it all so well: *By God's word at last my sin I learned, then I trembled at the law I'd spurned, till my guilty soul imploring turned to Calvary.* Have you learned of your sin? Have you turned to the Christ of Calvary? He can wash your guilty hands by His blood. He can purify your dirty heart by His Spirit. He can heal the broken hearted, open wide the prison door, He is able to deliver evermore, and Jesus, Jesus, Jesus is His name.