

The Fear of God

Exodus 20:18-21

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 20, verses 18 through 21. Today we come to the last in our series on the ten words. We've already seen how exceedingly rich the application of these commands are to our daily lives, and we barely scratched the surface of so much of what these commands say to us. Today's passage gives us the response of the people of God to this spectacular display of His presence and His thunderous announcement of His covenant words. And the response of the children of Israel may surprise you. But it also teaches us a huge lesson about the essence of true religion and the sum of true godliness. So let's hear from God's word in Exodus chapter 20 beginning in verse 18.

And 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. Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." And 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." So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord, we bow before You, and we ask that by Your word and Spirit You would teach us the fear of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It was the year 1992, and a national, nominated party candidate for the office of the president of the United States of America, indisputably the most powerful political office in the world in our time, was being interviewed by a group of adolescents on MTV. And the fateful question came, "What kind of underwear do you use? Boxers or briefs?" We don't know much about reverence and awe of human authority in our days. We are familiar and even flippant with the greatest of human authority in our own time. And that makes it difficult for us to appreciate the reverence and awe with which we ought to approach the living God. And you see this in many ways, especially in the setting of school and the relationships

between students and teachers and administrators.

The following stories are all true. The names have been changed and some of the circumstances blurred in order to protect the not so innocent. The second grade teacher had just spoken sharply to a little boy and pulled him off another child that he was beating up. As she straightened him up and squeezed his shoulders tightly, he exclaimed to her, "Don't you touch me, lady, or my lawyer will sue you." I wouldn't have dreamt of saying such a thing to my second grade teacher, Mrs. Teaderman, and she was every bit as formidable as her name sounds. I was afraid that she would have glared me into nothingness just with her stare.

The new graduate student walked into Dr. Robert Cave's office. Dr. Cave was a department chairman, and he was a respected professor at his institution. The first words of this graduate student, I'm not making this up, this happened recently, although the terminology used by this student is going to sound like he was right out of the late 60's, he said to Dr. Cave, "Yo, Bob. You know, dude, you're really going to have to help me with this schedule 'cause it's harshen my gig." I can't imagine saying that to my teacher.

The morning after a mid-term exam Mrs. Johnson was awakened at her home by a phone call from one of her students and his mother informing her that the English test had been entirely too hard and unfair and demanding that she make immediate reparations. I can't imagine doing that to my AP English teacher. But we live in a time when people are uncomfortably and inappropriately familiar and disrespectful of authorities. And that makes it very hard for us to even begin to understand the fear of the Lord. But there is no more important lesson in life than the fear of the lord. In fact, Moses says in the passage we have just read, that the reason God came to speak His word in the ears and the hearts of the people of Israel with His own mouth was so that they would fear Him always.

And so I'd like you to see 3 or 4 things in this passage. In verse 18, I want you to see the reaction of the people, this incredible experience of God coming Himself and speaking to them. What was their reaction? You see it in verse 18.

In verse 19 I want you to see the request of the people. What do the people ask Moses to do in light of their reaction? You see it in verse 19.

In verse 20 you see the reassuring words of Moses to them, and in verse 21 you see the reproach to God of Moses. Moses the covenant mediator reproaches God. Let's look at these things and learn what God is teaching us here.

I. The reaction of the people to the presence of God.

First, in verse 18 the reaction of the people to the presence of God, to the voice

of God, to the display of God's power. The presence of the Lord, we find out in verse 18, evoked a, perhaps to you, surprising response. The presence of the Lord provoked fear and trembling in Israel. Israel was scared to death when God came to meet with her. God's nearness can be a terrifying thing for sinners. Moses emphasizes this at the beginning of the encounter with the people in Exodus 19, verses 16-25. He tells about all the displays, the lightening, the thunder, the various pyrotechnics that God put on display to emphasize His majesty, and Moses tells us that the conclusion of God's word was also characterized by these thunderous rolls, and these fire balls, and lightening strikes. And he tells us, in verse 18, what the people's response was. They saw, they trembled, they stood at a distance. It could literally be translated: They feared, they trembled, and they stood at a distance.

Now what's significant about that? They're in the presence of God and yet their reaction is fear and trembling, and furthermore they stampeded. They fear, they tremble and they flee. You remember when this story started, the children of Israel were crowding in around Mount Sinai. They wanted to gaze. They wanted to look. So much so, that God said to Moses, "Don't let them step on the mountain because I will bring immediate judgment and destruction on anyone who sets foot on My mountain. Don't let them crowd in." Now at the end of the Ten commandments, we find out they are at a distance. Now they had gotten from next to the mountain to a distance from the mountain by fleeing. God came and met with them and they ran.

God's nearness can be terrifying for sinners. Intimacy with God can be a frightening thing for a sinner. Today we often long for intimacy with God, but we miss out on the reverence and awe of God in that intimacy. The children of Israel got the message of God's holiness and glory and might and power and sovereignty and transcendence loud and clear when He came and spoke to them Himself. God's nearness can be terrifying for sinners. That's what we see in the reaction of the people in verse 18.

II. The people make a request of Moses

But there's a second thing, too. The people go on to make a request. It is an insightful request that the people make to Moses. The voice of the Lord prompts the people to appeal to Moses to mediate. They want Moses to stand in between God and them. They want Moses to relay God's words to them. They want Moses to represent God's presence to them because God's immediate presence and His thunderous voice is overwhelming to them. Only God can make God safe for sinners. Hold that thought, And we'll come back to it in a minute.

I want you to see 3 things that Moses tells you in verse 19. First, He says that the people called to him to speak God's words to them from now on. "Speak to us yourself." The Hebrews are here asking for mediation. That was a wise

request. It was an insightful request. They realized, having been in the presence of God and having heard the voice of God, that they needed a mediator. And they also knew that God had appointed Moses as a mediator. Stop and think for a minute how gracious this was of God. What had the children of Israel been doing time and time again in Moses' career as their leader and mediator. They had been questioning his roll. Now, by having spoken to them directly, the people can't wait to hear Moses. God speaks to them and they go, "Uh, we'd like to hear Moses now." He's exalted Moses in their eyes just like He told Moses He would. He said that He would cause the people to hear Moses and to follow him. And isn't it gracious how God, in His own speaking to Israel, had promoted the esteem of His servant in the eyes of the people. But notice also that the people know that they need mediation. Now more than ever they realize they need a mediator. That's the first thing that Moses tells us in verse 19.

Secondly, notice that the people pledge their attentiveness and their obedience. "We will listen." The people are not saying, "O.k. We don't want to hear God, We want to hear you Moses, and we're not going to follow through on our agreement to obey." You remember, before the Ten commandments were spoken in exodus 19, The people had already said, "Lord, we will hear You. We will listen. We will follow You. We will obey You." And they are making it clear, "Moses, by asking you to speak to us we are not saying that we're not going to obey the Lord. We are going to obey the Lord. We're not reneging on our promise. We're going to follow through with that. We're going to be obedient to the word. We're going to listen to what you say. But would you speak to us?" The people are agreeing to follow through on their commitment to God for obedience.

And then thirdly, look in verse 19. The people fear death if "God speaks to us." "Let not God speak to us or we will die." And so they flee. Isn't it an amazing reaction? Get this reaction of Israel to the presence of God. The whole purpose of the exodus was what? That the children of Israel would be saved to worship. Over and over, God says that in the exodus. "I am saving you so that you will meet with Me on My mountain, and you will worship Me." That was the whole purpose: saved to worship. They were redeemed to worship. Now they're here. Now they're at the mountain. Now they're worshipping God, and God Himself comes and meets with them, and what do they say to Moses? "Uh, Moses, could you please ask Him never to speak to us again." That is exactly what they do. They don't want to hear the voice of the Almighty. "We'll die if we hear that voice again. Moses, speak in His place, or we're goners." You see the need for mediation is self evident to the Israelites at this point. They know that they cannot endure the unmediated presence of the holy, exalted God. They need a mediator. And so they ask Moses to fulfill the roll that God Himself has appointed him to fulfill.

Friends, that is an insight that we, who live in a supposedly advanced, scientific and technological age, could very much afford to learn. Because there are a lot of people who think that they can just traipse into the presence of God and

everything will be 'hunky dory.' How many times have you heard someone say to you, "Oh, God will forgive me. That's His job." That is not the attitude of the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, I assure you. They sense that they ought to be judged. You know their instinct is right in that.

Now that's not the whole story, and we'll see it in the very response of Moses, but that's part of the story. If you're in the presence of God, and you think that you are just fine in and of yourself, then you haven't seen God, or you haven't seen yourself, or both. The children of Israel see God's holiness, they see their sin, and they know they need a mediator. We could learn that from them.

III. The reassuring words of Moses.

Thirdly, look in verse 20. Look at the words of reassurance that Moses gives them. He explains to them that God's purposes in coming to them are good. His visitation is not meant to scare them to death. His visitation is not meant to discourage them, or frighten them, or fill them with dread. He has good purposes for them. In fact, Moses lists two good purposes of God that lead to a third good purpose in verse 20. And we learn in verse 20 that there is a difference between being frightened of God and fearing God. There is a world of difference between being frightened of God and fearing God.

Notice what Moses says in verse 20. He responds with the words "don't fear." You've heard that dozens of times as you've read through the Bible. When Samson's parents are approached by the angel of the Lord, what's the first thing He has to say? "Don't fear." When Mary is approached by the angel Gabriel, what's the first thing he has to say? "Don't fear." Over and over, when God, the angel of the Lord, or His representatives meet, draw near to, speak to the children of men, the reaction of men is fear. And the kind, and good, and gracious word of assurance from God is "Don't be afraid." And that is precisely the word that Moses gives to the people of God. "Don't be afraid."

But keep on reading. Look at what he says. "Do not be afraid, for God has come in order to test you. In order that the fear of Him may remain with you." Can I conflate that? "Don't be afraid. God came that you would fear Him." O.k. Help me here. "Don't be afraid, God came that you would obviously be afraid, and don't be afraid." And "He came that you would fear Him" Are not the same "afraid." Don't be afraid; He came that you would fear Him. There is a world of difference between being frightened of God, and fearing God.

Moses goes on to explain here that they should not fear because God has done this thing. He has shown them this display, He's drawn near to them so that they would always fear Him. But the fear that He's speaking of here at the end of verse 20 is not the fear of terror or dread; but the reverence that leads to obedience, reverence and awe of the gracious and sovereign God.

And Moses goes on to explain that God has a good and a two-fold reason for what He's done. "He's come to test you, and He's come to instill the fear of God in you." "He's come to test you." That is, He has come to prove them their need for mediation. Some commentators will say "the test is that God is going to test their obedience." Well, there's not a whole lot of time between the giving of the Ten Commandments, and the people standing at a distance and Moses talking to them again, for them to show their obedience to the Ten Commandments. So the testing here must be proving to them their need for a mediator.

And secondly, to instill in them a fear of God. That is, Moses is saying that God's awesome visual and vocal display were designed to cultivate an abiding fear of God that would lead to obedience. Look at his last words. "So that you may not sin." You see, the people of God in the presence of the Almighty God were to experience two things at the same time. On the one hand, they were to realize that God was an awesome God, and they ought to be judged. And at the same time, that God was a good and a merciful God, and He had provided for them a mediator, and He had redeemed them Out of Egypt, and He was for them.

And that's always there, my friends, in the fear of God. When you have the real fear of God there is always a sense that "You know, I don't have any business being here In God's presence. And yet it is the one thing in all of life, it is the one place in all of life that I want to be." There's the sense that "I don't have any right to be in the presence of God, and at the same time, it is the thing that I long for the most." You know, we just read the story of the Syrophoenician woman today. Does she not capture that? Jesus speaks to her, "Shall I give the bread from the table to the dogs?" And that dear Canaanite woman says to our Lord Jesus, she looked into His face and she says, "You're right Lord, I don't have any right to be here. But I'd eat the scraps from Your table." She knows she has no right to what she's asking, but she wants it anyway. And those two components are always there in the fear of God. We are humble in ourselves because we know what we deserve, and we know we don't have a right in His presence.

But we also come to Him believingly because we know that the Lord is good. C.S. Lewis captures this so beautifully in his writings. Many of you are fans of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and know those passages in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where he describes this so effectively. I'll just refer to two of them.

One is that famous scene where Lucy and Susan are talking with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan, the lion. It goes like this: "Is - is he a man?" said Lucy. "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you, He is the King of the wood, and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion - *the* lion, the great Lion." "Ooh!" said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees

knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." "I'm longing to see him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point." That's precisely how the fear of God is. He's great! He's the King. There's nothing safe about Him. But He's good." And you cannot help but be drawn near to Him.

Lewis goes on to say this: "People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and they found that they couldn't look at him and they went all trembly... But, "His voice was deep and rich and somehow took the fidgets out of them. They now felt glad and quiet and it didn't seem awkward to stand there and say nothing."

The fear of God always knows on the one hand that we have no business being in His presence, and yet on the other hand, that He made us to be in His presence. And our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him. The fear of the Lord is the soul of religion, and there is a difference between being frightened of God and fearing God. Fearing God is that controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God and the profound reverence that flows from it for Him. The fear of God is that joy-filled reverence and awe of the one true God which shakes us to the core of our being. And it brings forth a response of faith and love.

And it's not just an Old Testament idea, but is also in the great New Testament passage that says that we have come to Mt. Zion, not to the frightening display of God's power at Mt. Sinai. In Hebrews chapter 12, if you look at verses 28 and 29, which are the author of Hebrews' final words about that great comparison, he says this, "Therefore we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken. Let us show gratitude by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." That is a New Testament dimension of the fear of God.

And in Revelation 14 and 19, we are told that in glory we will fear God. There's a difference between being frightened of God and fearing God. If you fear God, there is no reason to be frightened of Him. But if you do not fear God, there is every reason to be frightened of Him. And so God wants to cultivate in these Israelites the true, gracious, joy-filled, saving reverence and awe of Him, which is at the heart of every believer.

IV. The reproach of Moses to God.

One last thing, friends. In verse 21 we see the reproach of Moses to God. The

people stand at a distance, we read in verse 21, but Moses draws near to the Lord again. And even as Moses draws near to the Lord again, we're reminded that no fallen human being can draw near to God without a mediator. And you know what? Even Moses who really was the mediator of the old covenant, who was appointed by God to be the mediator of the old covenant he could not have drawn near to God were there not a greater Mediator, because Moses was a sinner. And though Moses brought sacrifices on behalf of the people before God, and though Aaron lifted up those sacrifices, we learn in the book of Hebrews that the blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sins. And so Moses himself needed a mediator.

As Moses moved back into the unspeakable privilege of the very presence of the almighty God, what we himself could not have fully appreciated and understood, and what we ourselves can hardly grasp and comprehend, is that his ability to serve as the mediator was grounded in the mediation of a greater mediator. Moses needed a mediator every much as did Israel. He was a sinner. He was a fallen, human, sinner, and he was God's appointed mediator. But He himself had a mediator, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners, whose glorious saving mediation not only stretches forward to our day and on the way to glory, but stretched back in time covering Moses. And covering the children of Israel and sheltering them, and shielding them from the presence of the glory and the judgment of the Lord God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts. Because the Lord Jesus Himself offered Himself a sacrifice, a propitiation for the sins of His people, that we might be shielded from the condemnation that we deserve, and might come into His presence and into the presence of the great King, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with Jesus, Call him "Abba, Father."

You see, only God can make God safe. Your righteousness can't make God safe. You can't reinterpret God and say, "Oh, God is love." Well the Bible says a few other things about God, too. "Well, God loves everybody. He's not going to send anybody to hell." The Bible says something different. You can't make God safe by getting rid of hell. The Bible won't let you. You can't make God safe by buying into universalism. The Bible won't let you. Can't make God safe by playing one attribute of God over against another. The Bible won't let you. You can't make God safe by being righteous in His sight in and of yourself. The only way God can be made safe is by God, and He does that in His Son Jesus Christ.

And so if you are here this morning, and you are frightened of God, let me introduce you to the fear of God in His Son. For if you will trust in His son, you will know reverence for Him but not dread.

If you're here this morning and you don't know His Son, and you don't fear God, let me introduce you to the dread of God. Because apart from Christ, you will stand before Sinai, and it will be hurled on you just like it was hurled on the Mediator, except Jesus Christ bore that weight so that weight would never be borne by those who fear Him. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, grant that we would so trust in Jesus Christ that we would have in our hearts no terror of God, but only reverence, and love, And joy, and awe, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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