

Fire on the Mountain

Exodus 19:9-25

Israel is about to receive the law of liberty from God Himself (Jms. 2:12). There's fire, smoke, and earthquakes on the mountain as God's people prepare for the Ten Commandments. Though we longer gather at Mt. Sinai, the New Testament teaches God has set the church on fire.

NOTES:

Covenant Law

Israel is God's special treasure, kingdom of priests, and holy nation, saved completely by His grace from external enemies like Pharaoh and Amalek and *the* internal enemy of sin. Because He loves them He gives His law, and the law is not a cold list of rules but a gift of wisdom to teach a maturing people how to love the Lord: "And He said: "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord. For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you" (Ex. 34:10). The Mosaic law is part of the covenant grace that began in the garden of Eden, unfolding like a flower until the fullness of God was revealed in Jesus Christ. The contrast between Moses and Jesus is not between bad and good, but between lesser and greater. Jesus said the whole law is summed up in the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"; "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-40). The first corresponds to the first table of the law, the first four commandments, and the second to the second table, the last six commandments (cf. Rom. 13:8-9). The Ten Commandments themselves are a summary of the whole law (Ex. 34:27-28). God's instruction is nested and connected this way because He is one, and because He is love. His covenant law teaches us how to love Him and one another: "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). This is why for centuries basic Christian discipleship has included the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments.

Consecration

God speaks to Moses through the thick cloud so everyone will hear, know the words are God's, and believe forever (v9). No one can see God's face and live, so His glory is visible and audible but limited to protect Moses and the people (cf. Ex. 33:30-22). In preparation for receiving the law from the King on the third day, as a kingdom of priests, the people must consecrate themselves in three ways. They must wash their clothes (vv10, 14). Adam was made from *adamah*, and as the result of sin the ground is cursed and uncooperative. He will die and return to it (Gen. 3:17-19). Dirt is symbolically unclean so they must wash. Clothes are also for glory and beauty, so they need to be ready when the King of glory comes. We wash ourselves physically for worship and other important occasions, and we "wash" spiritually at the beginning of worship in the confession of sin. Second, they set a boundary around the mountain that cannot be crossed on pain of death (vv12-13). God's holiness must be honored. The people gather at the foot of the mountain, the priests come further up, and Moses and Aaron all the way up to the

Fire on the Mountain

Exodus 19:9-25

Lord (vv17, 22, 24). The mountain has gradations of holiness like the tabernacle with its courtyard, holy place, and holy of holies. The third command of consecration is to abstain from sex (v15). This is not because sex is sinful, but because the people are to focus on preparing for this marriage covenant (cf. 1 Cor. 7:5; Ez. 16:8-16; Jer. 31:32). Israel washes, sets boundaries, and focuses, so the Lord summons them with the trumpet and descends in fire on the top of the mountain (vv16-18). The mountain is an altar burning on the top; the Lord comes down and summons Moses to come up (v19). He then sends Moses down to warn the people lest they come too close and perish (v21). God is terrifying and awesome, scary to behold yet magnetically and mesmerizingly beautiful. This is what it's like to know and worship the triune God of heaven.

Come to Mount Zion

The second half of Hebrews 12 is an inspired commentary on this passage. We don't come to a physical mountain, smoke and fire, or have commands to wash our clothes and draw a physical boundary (Heb. 12:18-21). "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 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, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:22-24). He does not contrast the old and new covenants to say we can now just relax because God isn't thundering anymore. He argues *a fortiori*, how much more should we listen to Him to now: how "much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." 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" (vv25-27). Right after Jesus died, there was an earthquake and the veil in the temple was torn in two (Matt. 27:51). The final sacrifice for sin was given, the way into the holy of holies was provided was made once and for all, and the distinction between Jew and Gentile was abolished. We don't come to the mountain or tabernacle or temple, all copies of the heavenly reality, but to God Himself in heaven. He hasn't changed, but our nearness to Him has. Worship like it: "Therefore 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, for our God is a consuming fire" (v28). We're not supposed to make worship acceptable to the world, but to God. Why? Because He is a consuming fire. He's still holy, still beautiful, still glorious and unchanging. We behold Him in the face of Jesus Christ when we worship with reverence and awe, preparing for the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9).