

# Drawing Near to God

Exodus 20:18-26

We come to the end of the Ten Commandments, God's covenant law given to His redeemed people. Israel responds with fear and faith. Moses mediates in the thick darkness and the Lord draws them near to worship and be blessed.

NOTES:

## Right Fear

There's fire on the mountain: thunder, lightning, trumpeting, and smoke, just as when Israel first met God there (v18; 19:16-17). It's a scary place and anyone in his right mind would fear. R.J. Rushdoony: "Fear is a necessary aspect of man's life. Fear can be real or imagined, but a healthy fear is an awareness of the reality around us, and of actual dangers. A man who on a treacherous mountainside acts recklessly and without fear of consequence is a fool." God holds back when He reveals Himself in creation, but what we see is a true glimpse of His power and glory whether we are looking at the Milky Way galaxy or a perfectly crafted snowflake. Israel encounters both natural and special revelation, and sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. We experience thunder and lightning occurring in nature, as did the Psalmist: "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; The God of glory thunders...The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, Yes, the Lord splinters the cedars of Lebanon" (Ps. 29:3, 5). We hear Yahweh speak supernaturally through His word, and in the world around us. Israel doesn't feel generally spiritual or just glad to be alive. God is the personal object of their fear, and because He is holy and they are not, they know that to get too close is to risk death (v19). Christians tragically downplay the fear of God, but the Bible is full of it:

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. –Psalm 19:9

In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, And His children will have a place of refuge. –Proverbs 14:26

The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe. –Proverbs 29:25

You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the Lord. –Leviticus 19:14

Charles Buck said, "Fear of God is that holy disposition or gracious habit formed in the soul by the Holy Spirit, whereby we are inclined to obey all God's commands; and evidences itself, 1. By a dread of his displeasure. 2. Desire of his favour. 3. Regard for his excellencies. 4. Submission to his will. 5. Gratitude for his benefits. 6. Sincerity in his worship. 7. Conscientious obedience to his commands."

## Right Faith

It's not just God's power, but His holiness that makes us rightly fear Him. Israel thinks if He speaks to them, they might die (v19). Moses says not to fear because God has come to test them so they would not sin; don't fear so you can fear rightl (v20). Obviously this does not mean that God came down to scare them, see if they would sin

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at all, and if so destroy them. The test is rather to see if they will fear Him rightly, confess their sin, and worship Him. What do you fear more than God? Fearing God is not about a one-time mountaintop experience, but about keeping His commands, walking in the light for a lifetime. Healthy fear knows how powerful and holy God is, that while He could give us over to eternal death, “His mercy extends to those who fear Him” (Lk. 1:50). Healthy fear produces healthy faith that knows we need a mediator, someone to stand between God and us. Moses was a good mediator, ascending into the thick darkness where God was, but the people still had to stand afar off (v21). He was just a picture of Jesus, the true mediator to come: “For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house”; “But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises” (Heb. 3:3; 8:6). Moses could intercede, pray to God for the people, and speak to them on behalf of the Lord, but only because he trusted in the promised mediator to come: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (1 Tim. 2:5-6). Today we ascend into God’s presence, are filled with His glory and not consumed because we are in Jesus Christ, a better mediator.

## Right Worship

God knows they will leave the mountain but continue to encounter Him at the altar. HE forbids them from making anything out of silver and gold to be with Him (v23). The second commandment already ruled out images of Yahweh, but He will have no graven attendants either. The altar must be of earth, and if stones are used, they must be uncut—rough, natural, lacking craftsmanship (vv24-25). God doesn’t want steps up to the altar lest their nakedness be exposed on it (v26). The altar in the tabernacle and the one in the temple had steps, but God also proscribed that the priests cover their nakedness. He doesn’t want Israelite to look or act like Canaanites. He doesn’t want fancy, distracting sanctuaries that will lead His people astray, making worship really all about them—“for yourselves” (v23). This can be done in ornate, ostentatious, or gaudy cathedrals, and it can be done in warehouses with smoke, lighting, transparent pulpits and “authentic” shiplap accent walls. Anything can be corrupted or in principle redeemed, which is why God forbids steps here that He will later allow. The point is worldliness. The two offerings mentioned are the burnt (ascension) and peace offerings, which are about consecration and fellowship. The animal in the ascension offering would be consumed completely by fire and rise to God as a sweet smelling aroma. He speaks His sharp, doubled-edged word to transform us and delight Himself. A portion of the peace offering would be given to the worshiper to eat in fellowship with the Lord. We are devoted to and delight Him, and He feeds and nourishes us. In the book of Daniel, and stone cut without hands smashes the metal idol and becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth (Dan. 2:34-35). We fear the Lord, trust the Savior, forsake and our sins, worship Him in simple faith, and wherever we are He comes to bless us (v24).