

Exodus 19:16-25

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The last section of chapter 19 contains a description of the LORD's descent to Mount Sinai and a restatement of the warning to the people not to climb the mountain (vv. 20 – 25). Even the priests must consecrate themselves before approaching Him. Only Moses and Aaron could climb up the mountain to meet with the LORD. Any violation of these rules would be tragic.

After two days of preparation, *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.* The same phenomenon of *thunder, lightning,* and earthquakes occurs just before the trumpet judgments in Revelation ([Revelation 8:5-6](#)).

The Hebrew word for “*trumpet*” here (Heb. *shofar*) is different than the word in v. 13, where it refers to a “ram’s horn.” Here, the *shofar* is the word most used for “horn” and is sounded for special occasions (see [1 Kings 1:34](#) and the trumpet judgments in [Revelation 8](#)) and for worship ([Psalms 98:5–6, 150:3](#)). In addition to the *trumpet* announcing God’s arrival, there were *thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain.* God used *thunder* to demonstrate His power before Pharaoh ([Exodus 9:23](#)). God’s voice is likened to *thunder* in passages such as [Psalm 77:18; 104:7](#). The word translated *cloud* is the same used to describe God going before Israel in a pillar of *cloud* to lead them out of Egypt ([Exodus 13:21](#)).

It is not surprising that the *thunder, lightning, very loud trumpet* blasts, and the *cloud* were so overwhelming *that all the people trembled* while they remained *in the camp*, before they even approached the *mountain*. But in spite of their fear, *Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.* God knew this would be their reaction, so His prohibition of getting too close to the mountain seems to have been preparing their hearts for what was about to transpire.

In light of their fear, drawing near to the mountain was probably the last thing the people wanted to do. Regardless, they needed to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears that the LORD, the God with Whom they were entering a covenant, the Sovereign of the earth, was the true God who had the power to enforce the covenant.

It must have been a stunning sight to see that *Mount Sinai was all in smoke*, even more so knowing that it was *because the Lord descended upon it in fire*. Fire is very often a picture of the LORD's judgment ([Exodus 9:23f](#); [Psalms 11:6, 9:3](#)). But here, as previously in Exodus (the burning bush, [Exodus 3:2](#)), fire is the evidence of the LORD's presence. When the second generation is being prepared to enter the Promised Land and these events are being recounted in the book of Deuteronomy, the people are warned to not forget the covenant they have entered, for "the LORD your God is a consuming fire" ([Deuteronomy 4:24](#)). This event is evidence of that reality.

The *fire* of the LORD's presence was so great that *its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace*, indicating that there was a great amount of smoke present. In addition to fire and smoke, *the whole mountain quaked violently*. The word for *violently* is the Hebrew "meod," which normally means "very." The idea here seems to be that the mountain shook (literally "trembled") "very much" or "very often" or "very violently." The word translated *quaked* has the same root as the description of the people's fearful reaction while *in the camp—they trembled*.

In this setting *the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder*. The increasing loudness of the trumpet describes an escalating process—the volume of the trumpet got continually louder. That *Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder* seems to describe an ongoing conversation between the LORD and Moses. Moses would speak, then the LORD would speak. Verses 20-25 repeat much of what has already been said earlier in the chapter. It is probably repeated here to emphasize to the people the importance of what was happening. First, *the Lord came down on Mount Sinai*, but not all the way. He came *to the top of the mountain*, probably to keep a distance between Him and His people at the foot of the mountain. From here, *the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain*, and being the obedient servant, *Moses went up*.

The message from the LORD is in vv. 21-22. It began when *the Lord spoke to Moses*. He was to *go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish*. Again, Moses was to *warn the people* about becoming too curious about seeing the LORD and what He was doing. They were warned in vv. 12-13, and it was important to repeat it. Violating this would have fatal consequences. Included in this was a reminder to *let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, or else the Lord will break out against them*. The word for "break out" (Heb. "parats") can mean "to make a breach" or "to tear down" ([2 Kings 14:13](#); [1](#)

[Chron. 14:11](#)). It has the idea of bursting through to execute judgment or to destroy.

One question that arises here is the identification of the *priests*. The priesthood of Aaron had not been set up yet, so who were the *priests* at this time? A priest is an intermediary. Moses had engaged with “able men” to serve as intermediary judges between Moses and the people since [Exodus 18:24-26](#). The *priests* in this passage could come from this group, It could also include firstborn males who had been dedicated to the LORD in [Exodus 13:2](#) and are seen later participating in performing sacrifices ([Exodus 24:5](#)). It could include the elders of the tribes as well.

Responding to the LORD’s admonition to *warn the people* not to come too near, *Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’”* The “You” is emphatic in the Hebrew text, signifying “You Yourself warned us.” Essentially, Moses repeated the LORD’s words back to Him. It could be that Moses was reacting to the LORD repeating this command, and now is saying, “You already told us this, and we got it.” But the LORD knows the people, their stubbornness and short memory. He knew that it was important to remind them of this requirement.

Apparently ignoring Moses’ comment, *the Lord said to him, “Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you.* Moses’ brother Aaron was to accompany Moses the next time they ascended the mountain. Aaron will be appointed as the high priest later ([Exodus 28](#)). Though Aaron could go up the mountain, Moses was commanded to *not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord*, because, as He warned them earlier, *He will break forth upon them*. Even though he might have deemed it unnecessary, and desired to avoid an additional trip up and down the mountain, Moses obeyed the LORD once again, *Moses went down to the people and told them*.

This section prepared the people for receiving the covenantal Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments in chapter 20, and continuing through chapter 24. The Mosaic Law (covenant) has been compared to other treaties in the Ancient Near East, particularly the Hittite treaty of the second millennium BC. It resembles what is called a suzerainty treaty, which is a covenant between a sovereign ruler (in this case, the LORD) and His subjects (the Israelites). The subjects must obey what is in the treaty in order to enjoy the benefits of the sovereign. This type of covenant would be familiar to the Israelites. They knew they had to be loyal to their Suzerain God in order to gain the promised benefits. That is why, on Mount Sinai, when the LORD commanded the

people to obey Him, they agreed and stated, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” ([Exodus 19:8](#)).

As we will see, this covenant clearly spells out how the Israelites could enjoy and benefit from their relationship with Yahweh, their Suzerain King, as His loyal vassals. The Law will set forth a manner of living that will bring immense blessing to Israel, if they obey. The basic tenant will be that God gets to rule over them, they are not to rule over one another. They are, instead, to serve one another. They are to tell the truth, treat one another with respect, honor marriage and family, and care for the possessions of others. In short, they are to treat others as they desire to be treated.

Any human organization consisting of people who voluntarily behave in this manner will prosper immensely. God will soon set forth this manner of living, and cement in the minds of the people that they are not to seek authorities other than God. The tendency of humans is to point to an authority that justifies them engaging in exploitation of others. But Israel’s Suzerain ruler makes it clear that the blessings will be cut off if the nation follows such a path of self-indulgence.

In short, the Mosaic covenant was meant for Israel to be God’s representative on earth, a *kingdom of priests*. They were to be the light of the world (a holy nation) to show to other nations a better way to live. A nation that is self-governing will prosper dramatically beyond that of a tyranny. because God took them as His own possession, in order to serve this purpose. God’s commitment to Israel was not based upon Israel’s merit, but on God’s steadfast love and faithfulness ([Deuteronomy 7:6-8](#)). Therefore, as their Suzerain God, He demanded complete obedience in order to receive the blessing. In large part, the blessing is embedded within the obedience. A nation of people devoted to serving one another will gain immense prosperity, as compared to a nation ruled by self-serving tyrants.

Biblical Text:

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. ²⁰The 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. ²¹Then 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. ²²Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, or else the Lord will break out against them.”²³ Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’” ²⁴Then the Lord said to him, “Go down and come up *again*, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, or He will break forth upon them.” ²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them.