

Exodus 20:18-21

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The LORD manifested Himself in thunder, lightning, and smoke. The Israelites looked on in great dread, so much so that they asked Moses to speak to them instead of having the LORD speak to them. Moses replied that the LORD's presence was a test to see if they would obey Him and not sin.

While the LORD was dictating the Ten Commandments to Moses, *all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking.* It is significant that *all the people* witnessed the effects of the LORD's presence. This was not a secret occasion witnessed by a select few, it was seen by what was likely over a million people. God's testimony of His presence was made clear to all.

Overwhelmed by the sights and sounds, the people *trembled and stood at a distance.* Their *fear* was dread that caused them to tremble. Their *fear* caused them to *stand at a distance.* They were quite direct about what concerned them—they did not want to *die.* The people concluded from what they were experiencing that the presence of God was something they would not be able to endure. So they asked Moses to spare them.

In v. 19, *they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."* They wanted Moses to be their mediator because they thought that if God spoke to them directly, it would be fatal.

Moses' urged the people to *not be afraid.* However, Moses immediately tells them God's purpose was to instill them with *fear.* Why would Moses say, "Do not be afraid, God gave you this demonstration so you would be afraid?" Because Moses is contrasting two different fears. In the first instance, the people were *afraid* that they would *die.* In the second instance, Moses tells the people not to fear death. Rather, the real thing they should fear is sinning. This instruction is quite stark. Death should not be something we fear, but falling into sin is something we should fear. This is because sin brings much greater loss than physical death.

Moses said that *God has come* for two purposes. First, the coming was *in order to test you.* What was being tested? Perhaps the sincerity of the people's resolve to keep their end of the covenant. Abraham's obedience to

the LORD was tested in [Genesis 22:1](#). Second, He came *in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin*. This *fear* was to stay with them permanently and was to be a *fear* of their sovereign God who could judge them for failure to obey Him (if they *sin*) or reward them for their faithfulness. It was designed to instill and reinforce rewards for actions conforming to the covenant, and negative rewards for *sin*, disobedience to the covenant.

Moses had just given the people the summary of His covenant, that they were to be living in self-governing communities, serving each other's mutual benefit. Generally humans do not fare well absent accountability. The LORD wanted to burn an image in their mind that their covenant was with a God that was a consuming fire. *Sin*, disobeying God's covenant, would create a vastly worse result in their lives than would mere physical death.

Moses states that the *fear* of the LORD was the foundation that they *may not sin*. In light of His holiness and that He was giving His law to them, they were to conform their lives to His standards. To violate these standards was to *sin*. The same idea can be seen in the New Testament where John tells us that he wrote his first epistle so that his readers, who were also people of God, "will not sin" ([1 John 2:1](#)).

After Moses spoke, *the people stood at a distance*. God had told them earlier not to dare to pass certain boundaries or come up the mountain ([Exodus 19:12](#)). It appears that the people never even left the vicinity of the camp. So, they waited from afar *while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was*.

In the retelling of the history of the exodus in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses adds a detail about this episode. The people had made a request of Moses:

"...according to all you desired of the Lord your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.'

And the Lord said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.'" ([Deuteronomy 18:16-19](#)).

The LORD spoke a prophecy to Moses that foreshadowed the coming of a prophet like Moses, who God would raise up from among the people of Israel. This prophet would speak the very words of God, but without the awesome and fearful presence. The very words of God would come from the “second Moses.” The fulfillment of this prophecy is Jesus, who was God in flesh. He not only spoke the word of God, He was the Word of God, but veiled by being housed in a human body.

Biblical Text:

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. 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.” ²¹ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.