

Afraid of God's Presence

Exodus 20:18–21, Hebrews 10:23–31

Today we begin a short series looking at the “Book of the Covenant.”¹ The title comes from Exodus 24:7, where it is said of Moses, “Then he took the *Book of the Covenant* and read in the hearing of the people.” This is the short book—a little over three chapters in all—that Moses wrote after he had gone to speak with God when the people had said, “Don’t let God speak with us, lest we die” (20:19). The narrator records that “the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.” The Book of the Covenant is a digest and summary of all God’s holy commandments. We’ll have more to say about it in the coming weeks.

I have three points this morning: (1) We are separated from God; (2) We need a Mediator; (3) We need holy fear. First,

1. We are separated from God.

Consider the scene. The people of God, newly-delivered from enslavement in Egypt, had arrived at Mount Sinai. Moses had told them that God was going to meet with them in three days, and they were to prepare. They were to wash their bodies and put on clean clothes and gather at the base of the mountain. They were warned not to come right up to the mountain or let any of their animals get close to the mountain. If anyone touched the mountain he was to be killed.

People cannot just barge into the presence of the LORD without an invitation. It’s a little bit like a gated community in a wealthy part of town. A common citizen can’t just let himself in and begin to go around, ringing doorbells. If he does, he will be escorted out immediately, and if he is disorderly, he might go to jail. People who live in a gated community value their privacy and don’t want to be disturbed.

But God is much greater than a rich man. He desires to have fellowship with man; in fact, he made us to have fellowship with himself, but we must come on *his* terms. He is the source of all good. He is our true riches in a world of uncertainty. Whatever we have can be taken away in a moment, but God is our portion forever. If we are his sons and daughters by faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, we are welcome in his presence, but if we remain in our sin and unbelief we shall be eternally separated from him, forever lost in the torments of the lake of fire.

So for three days the people prepared to meet God. On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning. Have you ever seen a little child cower and cry at a loud boom of thunder? You might sit down with the child and put your arms around him and hold him close and have a nice talk and try to convince him with rational arguments that there is nothing to worry about, that he will be just fine, but he cannot be reassured. He sobs with loud sobbing and won’t give up. As

¹ ספר הברית

an adult, you have experienced many thunderstorms and lived to tell the tale, but he has not, and he is *terrified*—inconsolable.

On that particular morning at Sinai about 1500 BC there was a thick cloud over the mountain, and very loud, sustained trumpet blasts. The trumpet was not a silver trumpet playing a tune like “Trumpet Voluntary,” but a ram’s horn, called a shofar (שׁוֹפָר), playing long, mournful notes to get the peoples’ attention. Everyone in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain—perhaps two and a half million souls altogether. Mount Sinai was shrouded in smoke because of the presence of the LORD. The smoke billowed up from the mountain like smoke from a furnace—remember the recent wildfires in Hawaii and California, where people had to flee for their lives, the smoke and heat were so bad. At Horeb the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. The mountain was ablaze with fire. It was not a computer-enhanced movie soundtrack. It was real. These sights and sounds and smells of the lightning, thunder, trumpet blasts and acrid smoke got the people’s attention. They instinctively backed away. They had never seen anything like this. Who could come near to approach a God of awesome holiness?

Our text begins with the words, “Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood *afar off*.”

Note the words “afar off.” God is a God of awesome holiness. The Israelites were terrified. They instinctively realized that they could not come into the presence of the LORD God Almighty. They stood *afar off*. They could not get close. They knew intuitively that God is holy, and we are sinners. We do not measure up to his requirement of absolute perfection. Man the creature is separated from God. This is explicitly stated in Isaiah 59:2, where the prophet says, “But your iniquities have *separated* you from your God; and your sins have *hidden His face from you*, so that He will not hear.” Here is our spiritual state apart from Christ: we are *separated* from God. Our iniquities—the guilt of Adam’s first sin and the particular sins that we have personally committed—have separated us from God. God is a holy God. He is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens” (Heb. 7:26). He is a God of awesome holiness. Before his face we are undone. We do not measure up.

Some churches deny the doctrine of original sin. They teach that it would be unjust for man to be blamed for the sin of Adam. They wrongly conclude that babies are born in a state of innocency, that they they do not become sinners until they themselves personally commit sin. Now sinful man finds this teaching attractive. It sounds so fair—so democratic. The only problem with this teaching is that it cannot be squared with the explicit teaching of Scripture. The apostle Paul,

under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote that “as in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22), that “just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because *all* sinned” (Rom. 5:12). The sad fact is that the little babies we love to hold in our arms are members of the human race, the sons and daughters of our forefather Adam.

In the language of the *New-England Primer*, “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all.” The *New-England Primer* was the principal textbook for millions of colonists and early Americans. First compiled and published about 1688, it remained in use for more than 150 years and was often called “the little Bible of New England.” As noted in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, this early textbook both reflected the norms of Puritan culture and propagated those norms into early American thought.²

But the *New-England Primer* got it right: It is true! “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all.” That is a true summary of Scripture. It is inescapable: from the moment of conception we are sinners. In the immortal words of the King James Version, “Behold, I was *shapen in iniquity*; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). We sin because we are sinners. We are guilty, not only because we ourselves have sinned, but because we inherit the guilt of Adam’s first sin. “All *have sinned*” (past tense, that is, sinned in Adam) “and *come short* of the glory of God” (present tense, that is, guilty of our own sins which we ourselves commit). That guilt cannot be overlooked by a holy God. The only way it can be washed away is by the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, which—praise his holy name!—cleanses us from *all* sin” (1 John 1:7).

Do you recognize that you are a sinner, that because of your sin, you are separated from God, that your only hope of salvation is not trying to do better, but to say (in your own words), “Wash me, Savior, or I die! I have no hope of eternal life apart from you. Cleanse me from my sin and make me your child. I will obey and be your worshipper all the days of my life.” Is that something you want to do? We have a *merciful* Savior. “Sinners Jesus will receive.” Amen!

Not only are we separated from God. Secondly,

2. We need a Mediator.

Our text continues: “Then they said to Moses, ‘You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.’” The people rightly sensed that it is dangerous—even deadly—to speak with God directly. He is holy, and his holiness will consume us, if our sins are not washed away. Because of sin, God is our enemy, and the only way that can change—the only way that we can have peace with God, and reconciliation—is through Christ. Only by being justified by faith do we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-New-England-Primer> accessed 2-15-25

When two parties are at war, they need to sit down at the bargaining table and talk about conditions of peace. But because sin reigns in our hearts, we kill and destroy. We are alienated from God, so we are alienated from one another. We see this between nations. Wars and conflicts proliferate on this earth, bringing death and misery. But there are profits to be made from war, and those who stand to gain advocate for war. More war equals more profits. Follow the money.

There are wars and conflicts in our families, too. The first child ever born to human parents murdered his very own brother, his flesh and blood. Children—even covenant children in Christian homes—insist upon their own way, and when they do not get their way, they fight. They lash out. War is in the human heart. Jesus is the Prince of peace. He came to teach us the way of peace, but we insist upon our own way. We think that we will get away with this, but we are mistaken.

The Jews gathered at the foot of Sinai intuitively understood that they were at war with God. They heard his holy commandments thundered from heaven, and they realized that they fell short. They could not escape the thunder and lightning and fire and smoke, and they were terrified.

We are alienated from God because of our sin, and we need a mediator. A mediator is a person who attempts to make people involved in a conflict come to agreement. A mediator is a go-between, an intermediary, one who mediates between two parties to achieve peace. The Bible teaches that “There is one God, and one *mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

The Heidelberg Catechism, summarizing Scripture, waxes eloquent on this topic. What kind of mediator do we need?

“One who is a true and righteous man, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.”

Let there be no mistaking. We who are sinners need to be reconciled to a holy God. We need a mediator. The mediator must be both human and divine; he must be both God and man. The Catechism continues:

“Why must the mediator be a true and righteous man?

“Because God’s justice requires that human nature, which has sinned, must pay for its sin; but a sinner could never pay for others.

“Why must he also be true God?

“So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear in his humanity the weight of God’s wrath, and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

“Then who is this mediator—true God and at the same time a true and righteous man?

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was given to us for our complete deliverance and righteousness.”³

³ Heidelberg Catechism 15–18, <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>

The Lord Jesus Christ is the mediator that we all need. He is the only mediator between God and man, the only way of salvation. All people on earth must come to God the same way: through the only mediator, Jesus Christ.

Maybe you've been around people that refuse to get along. Both sides are unyielding, both sides want their own way. They refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other person's point of view. It can get ugly. There is tension in the air. The warring parties want you to choose sides. They don't want you to remain neutral. They want to be told that they are right and the other party is wrong. They want total vindication. You are in a predicament. You like both parties. You consider them friends. You would like to see them get along. You know you should be a peacemaker, but neither party wants peace. You need to pray that God will soften hearts and bring the warring parties to himself.

In the case of the Israelites, Moses willingly offered himself as the mediator. At God's invitation he went up upon the mountain to receive the law and communicate it to God's people. But there is a greater mediator: our Lord Jesus Christ, "the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises" (Heb. 8:6).

My dear hearer: We are separated from God. We need a Mediator. Thirdly, **3. We need holy fear.**

"And Moses said to the people, 'Do not *fear*; for God has come to test you, and that His *fear* may be before you, so that you may not sin.' So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was" (vv. 20–21).

This verse contrasts two types of fear: *servile* fear, which comes from consciousness of guilt—the fear of a slave cringing under threat of the master's whip falling upon him—and *healthy* fear. When Abraham, in obedience to God, was ready to plunge the knife into his dear sons's heart, the LORD called from heaven and said, "Don't do it, for now I know that you *fear* God." This healthy fear of God is what keeps us from sinning. "The *fear* of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."⁴

In the present case God is saying in effect, "I have not come to kill you but to *test* you. I want you to trust me implicitly."

For the Christian, the difference between servile fear and healthy fear is *Christ*. He has taken our sin upon him in his own body on the cross. He has taken our punishment upon himself. Our sins have been punished in Christ. The wages of sin is death, and our Lord of glory has died in our place. God has not appointed us to *wrath*, but to *obtain salvation* through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we fear God, not as a slave-master who is ready to punish us, but as a loving Father who wants the best for us and wants to test and train us in the way of godliness. When

⁴ Ps. 111:10

bad things happen to the Christian, we can know without a doubt that whatever happens to us is for his glory and *our good*—no exceptions! In the words of our text, God has come to *test* us, and that his fear may be before us, so that we may not sin. A child who knows he is loved by his father has a healthy respect for him. He wants to be like his father when he grows up. He wants to please his father. He is not worried that his father hates him and is out to destroy him. He knows his father is testing him to make him better.

The church needs a holy fear. We need to know that God is great, and worthy of praise. We come to worship, not to enjoy a concert but to acknowledge the Lord's excellent greatness. We sing with the Psalmist, "Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness" (Ps. 150:2). "Great is the LORD, and *greatly to be praised* in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness" (Ps. 48:1).

We come to worship to *praise* the LORD, for he is worthy of our praise. We come to worship, not to hear our favorite music but to sing the songs of Zion. As we state in our bulletin today, "biblical worship is *Word-centered*: the church *reads* the Word, *preaches* the Word, *sings* the Word, *prays* the Word and *practices* the Word." When we worship, the Word of God is to reign supreme.

The church's songs are not to be shallow, trite, superficial, silly, sappy, sentimental or unbiblical; rather, they are to reflect the truth of Scripture. *God's Word* is to be on our lips as we sing, so that we can hide it in our hearts, that we might not sin against God. Our goal is that the word of Christ might dwell in us richly in all wisdom as we teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord.

Worship songs are not meant to be entertainment. The purpose of congregational singing is two-fold: to *praise God* and to *teach truth*. What matters most in the songs we sing is not whether or not we like the tunes but whether or not they teach biblical truth accurately.

Looking carefully at what is being sung in churches makes one cringe: "You call me out upon the waters / The great unknown where feet may fail / And there I find You in the mystery / In oceans deep my faith will stand."

Do we have to go to the ocean to find God? Does our faith stand "in oceans deep" or in the truth of God's Word? Indeed, "the voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters."⁵ Yes, God *is* out on the ocean. Even if we are marooned on a vessel in the middle of the ocean, we cannot get away from God. Even on the ocean his hand will hold us. Our faith does not rest on oceans but on the sure Word of God. Amen!

⁵ Ps. 29

Here's another one: "We are His portion and He is our prize / Drawn to redemption by the grace in his eyes / If grace is an ocean, we're all sinking (ha ha) / So heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss." This is not the truth of Scripture but the confused notions of man.

One more: "Age to age He stands / And time is in His hands / Beginning and the end / Beginning and the end / The Godhead Three in One / Father Spirit Son / The Lion and the Lamb / The Lion and the Lamb." Here is a list of some biblical imagery, but what is it saying? What does it mean? It's anyone's guess. The Bible says, "I will sing with the *understanding*." The lyrics of the church's songs must accurately capture biblical truth. The church is to sing the Word, not promote the ideas of men.

We are separated from God. We need a Mediator. We need holy fear.

"Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."⁶
Amen!

⁶ Eccl. 12:13