

“HUSHING THE LAW’S LOUD THUNDER”

**I. Introduction**

- A. The idea that man should fear God has fallen upon hard times in the modern world.
1. This is a significant departure from the perspective that was held by most people in past eras.
  2. Even ancient pagans understood something of the terror of the holy, which means that they had more in common with the religion of the Bible than modern man has.
  3. C.S. Lewis makes this point in an essay entitled, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thought.”
  4. In it, Lewis reflects upon the apostle Paul’s speech to the people of Athens in Acts 17.
  5. Lewis notes that there were three classes of listeners present for that address: Jews, Judaizing Gentiles, and pagans.
  6. While there were important differences between these groups, all three believed in the supernatural, had an awareness of sin, and feared divine judgment for their sin.
  7. Modern man does not believe in any of these things, and this presents a significant barrier to our evangelistic efforts.
  8. This leads Lewis to conclude his essay by saying, “I sometimes wonder whether we shall not have to reconvert men to real paganism as a preliminary to converting them to Christianity.”
  9. The point is, a god who does not elicit fear is a god who is not worth seeking.

10. Such a god may not send forth any thunderbolts, but neither can he send any help in time of trouble.
- B. The main reason why the notion of fearing God is so alien to people's thinking these days is because most people have embraced the religion of 'I like to believe'-ism.
1. I say this because of how often people use the phrase 'I like to believe' when they talk about spiritual matters.
  2. If your religious views are based on what you would like to believe, then the fear of God will be the first thing that you jettison.
  3. Nobody likes to believe that "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb. 10:31)
  4. But this is precisely what both the Bible and the human conscience tell us.
  5. The only way to get around the fear of God it is by ignoring the truth.
  6. And as J. Gresham Machen once pointed out, "It is a pitiable cowardice to try to overcome fear by ignoring facts." [*God Transcendent*, 32]

## II. The Terror of Sinai

- A. Our text begins by telling us how the Israelites responded to the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai.
1. God delivered his law in a manner that underscored his holiness and transcendence.
  2. He descended on Sinai in a storm theophany that temporarily transformed the mountain into a sanctuary of the divine glory.

3. God came down in fire and thick smoke.
  4. The entire mountain trembled, as if it were undergoing an earthquake.
  5. There were thunders and lightnings and a trumpet blast that kept getting louder and louder.
- B. Even from a purely natural perspective, such phenomena have the power to strike fear in our hearts.
1. People who have lived through severe wildfires — like the ones that have taken place in California in recent years — will tell you that fire has to be taken very seriously.
  2. When it comes to earthquakes, even the minor ones that New Hampshire experiences from time to time are a little unnerving.
  3. And loud thunder crashes and bright flashes of lightning always get our attention.
  4. Of course, some thrill-seekers might think that it would have been a rush to witness the spectacle at Sinai.
  5. They would not think that way if they were actually there.
  6. This was not just an extreme weather event.
  7. It was a manifestation of the divine glory.
- C. On the occasions in the Bible when such manifestations take place, the people who witness them are stricken with fear.
1. The prophet Isaiah was undone when he was given a vision of God's heavenly throne room.

2. The apostle John was incapacitated by his vision of the glorified Christ while he was on the island of Patmos.
  3. God's nearness is utterly terrifying to sinful man.
  4. This is why the people of Israel responded to the Sinai theophany with sheer terror.
  5. They were not just afraid of the physical phenomena.
  6. They were afraid of God.
- D. God gave his people his law in this manner for a reason.
1. He did so in order to teach them something about his law.
  2. He wanted them to understand that the law is not just good advice.
  3. God gave ten commandments, not ten suggestions.
  4. The law reveals God's perfect standard of righteousness.
  5. This means it also exposes our sin and places us under divine judgment.
  6. The terror of Sinai underscores that fact that the law cannot save us.
  7. The law is good, but all that it can do is command us how to live and then evaluate our performance.
  8. This is why Calvin says that the terrifying signs of lightning and smoke at Sinai "were added as seals to the promulgation of the Law, because the Law was given to cite slumbering consciences to the judgment-seat, that, through fear of death, they might flee for refuge to God's mercy."
  9. This is exactly how we see the law functioning in this passage.

10. The people realized that they would die if God spoke to them directly.
  11. They realized that they could not bear the unmediated presence of God.
- E. As we noted earlier, modern man cannot understand this.
1. Most people in our culture think that God exists for their benefit.
  2. In the words of pollster George Barna, “To increasing millions of Americans, God — if we even believe in a supernatural deity — exists for the pleasure of humankind. He resides in the heavenly realm solely for our utility and benefit. Although we are too clever to voice it, we live by the notion that true power is accessed not by looking upward but by turning inward.” [cited in Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 30-31]
  3. This helps us to understand why so many popular Christian books are steeped in mysticism.
  4. The mystic undertakes a quest for a vision of what Martin Luther described as ‘God naked’, God as he is in his own nature and majesty.
  5. Many popular books promise their readers something more, something deeper than what can be found through the Bible and prayer and the church’s public worship.
  6. The problem with this approach to God is that it stands in sharp contrast to the teaching of the Bible.
  7. Paul tells Timothy that God “dwells in unapproachable light.” (1 Tim. 6:16)
  8. The book of Deuteronomy says that we are to be content with the fact that “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children

forever." (Deut. 29:29)

9. The mystical quest for God is doomed because, as theologian Herman Bavinck explains, "The distance between the Creator and the creature is much too great for human beings to perceive God directly. The finite is not capable of containing the infinite... all revelation is mediate. No creature can see or understand God as he is and as he speaks in himself." [*Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, 309-10.]
10. If we think that it is no big deal to draw near to the living God, if we think that we can enjoy a degree of intimacy with him that goes beyond what he makes available through the gospel, then the god with whom we are communing is not the God of the Bible.
11. The God of the Bible is "a consuming fire." (Heb. 12:29)
12. He is "greatly to be feared." (Ps. 89:7)

### III. God's Provision of a Mediator

- A. The loud thunder of Sinai showed the people their need for a mediator.
  1. They came to Moses and said, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."
  2. This is exactly what God said would happen back in Exodus 19.
  3. He told Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever." (Ex. 19:9)
  4. God gave the law to his people in this manner so that they would see their desperate need for the mediator that he was going to provide for them.
  5. Of course, Moses was not the true mediator between God and man.

6. He was only a typological foreshadowing of that mediator.
  7. Moses was a sinful man just like you and me.
  8. His sin even prevented him from being able to enter into the Promised Land.
  9. Moses himself needed a mediator.
  10. This is why the New Testament says that “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).
- B. Moses responded to the people’s request by telling them, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”
1. The phrase “Do not fear” appears at numerous points in the Bible, especially in passages where God reveals himself to his people.
  2. There are two things that we should note about this.
  3. First, when God reveals himself to people, he shows them who he really is.
  4. He doesn’t present them with a picture of what they would like him to be like.
  5. He gives them a glimpse of his glorious majesty, and even a glimpse is too much for them to handle.
  6. They are in danger of being crushed by the weight of the divine glory.
- C. The second thing to note about the words “Do not be afraid” is what they tell us about God’s mercy.
1. People have every reason to be afraid of the living God.

2. The Israelites were right to be terrified of what they saw and heard at Sinai.
  3. We are right to respond to the loud thunder of God's law by lamenting our failure to live up to it.
  4. God is holy, and we are not.
  5. He is the judge of all the earth, and our sin places us under his just wrath.
  6. Yet God tells his people, "Do not be afraid."
  7. He can say this because he has provided a way for us to come into his presence in safety.
  8. He can say it because he has provided a mediator.
  9. As John Newton puts it, Christ "has hushed the law's loud thunder"; he has "quenched Mount Sinai's flame."
  10. The words, "Do not be afraid" assure us that we can enjoy communion with God when he comes to us clothed in the gospel.
- D. Moses also tells the people that God has come "to test" them.
1. This tells us something important about the purpose of the Sinai covenant.
  2. It was given as a test.
  3. We saw this back in chapter 19, where God told the people, "if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (19:5-6)



4. The people responded to this by saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." (19:8)
  5. God set up the Sinai covenant as a probationary trial, a period of testing to see whether the people would uphold their promise to perform what God required of them.
  6. Of course, they failed the test, and their failure eventually led to the exile and the loss of the theocracy.
  7. God's purpose in setting up this test was not to see if the Israelites could earn his favor but to show them that they were incapable of doing so.
  8. God set up the Sinai covenant in order to show his people their need for a better covenant, a covenant that would not depend on their performance but on his gracious promise.
- E. Another thing to note about Moses' response to the people is that he uses the word "fear" in two different senses.
1. He tells the people not to fear, but then he says that God wants the fear of him to be before them.
  2. The only way to make sense of this is to conclude that Moses is talking about two kinds of fear.
  3. The first kind is the fear of punishment, the fear that sinful man experiences whenever his darkness is exposed by the light of God's glory.
  4. The second kind of fear is the fear that accompanies faith, the reverence and respect that every true believer has for God.
  5. The gospel does away with the first kind of fear, but it cultivates the second kind.

6. As J. Gresham Machen explains, "Even the Christian must fear God. But it is another kind of fear. It is a fear rather of what might have been than of what is; it is a fear of what would come were we not in Christ. Without such fear there can be no true love; for love of the Saviour is proportioned to one's horror of that from which man has been saved. And how strong are the lives that are suffused with such a love! They are lives brave, not because the realities of life have been ignored, but because they have first been faced — lives that are founded upon the solid foundation of God's grace. May such lives be ours!" [*God Transcendent*, 33]
7. Such lives are ours if we have Christ as our mediator with God.

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. Only Jesus has truly drawn near to the thick darkness where God is.
- B. When we approach God through Christ's mediation, we do not draw near to a god of our own devising.
- C. We do not draw near to a god before whom we can stand in our own merit without fear.
- D. We draw near to the one true and living God, the God who is a consuming fire.
- E. And because we come into his glorious presence clothed in the righteousness of Christ, his presence does not bring us terror and dread.
- F. Instead, in his presence we find fullness of joy.