

THUNDEROUS DIALOGUE

EXODUS 19:16-19 and 20:18-20

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A farmer put an advertisement in the local newspaper. It read, "Hard working, obedient mule for sale. Contact Farmer Jones if interested." One of the other farmers in that community knew Farmer Jones and went to see him. He asked, "Do you still have that mule for sale?" "Sure do," replied Farmer Jones. "Well, let's go take a look at him and see if he's everything you say he is," the prospective buyer declared. So they walked out to the pasture where upon Farmer Jones took a two-by-four and hit the mule right between the eyes. "Wait a minute," said the buyer. "I thought you said the animal was an obedient, hardworking mule?" "He is," replied Farmer Jones, "but first you have to get his attention."

And that's precisely what God did when He came down upon the mountain on the third day. He got the Israelites' attention in a way that was truly awesome. Let's take a look at what happened as revealed in the two passages of Scripture that were read just a few minutes ago. First of all, a thick cloud descended upon the mountain, perhaps much like what takes place on the Peaks of Otter from time to time. That was followed by peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, and then a very loud trumpet blast. In response, Moses led the Israelites to the foot of the mountain whereupon God descended upon it in smoke and fire. The entire mountain began to tremble violently and the sound of the trumpet blasts grew louder and louder. Like a king whose arrival is announced by a panoply of trumpets, the Lord had come to meet with His people, and then something almost unbelievable took place. Moses began speaking to the Lord, and the voice of God answered Him.

Caught up in the midst of this display of divine power, the people of Israel were terrified. They had never seen or experienced anything like this. Yes, they remembered what had happened in Egypt and what had taken place at the Red Sea. But this was far beyond any of those other times when the Lord had revealed His presence and power. They cried out to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." Had you or I been there, we might have been saying the same thing. In response Moses tried to reassure the people that the Lord did not intend to harm them. He did, however, want them to experience His omnipotent majesty so that they would revere Him and obey

Him. Or as Moses himself said, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

As we think about this holy moment when the Lord came down upon the mountain to meet with His people, what does this encounter have to say to you and me in the twenty-first century? There are three things that I would like to call to your attention. First, God reveals Himself through His creation. That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote in Romans 1:20, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...." It's also what the writer of Psalm 19:1 was talking about when he wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God and skies proclaim the work of His hands." Furthermore, God reveals Himself through His creation in three uniquely distinct ways—by design, by testimony, and by phenomenon.

When we observe the universe, we can't help but begin to appreciate that it is a very complex creation that could not have come into existence all by itself. When rationally investigated, it provides unmistakable evidence of having been designed by a Creator. Even scientists who are not Christians are being driven to this conclusion. As a respected astronomer, George Greenstein has observed, "As we survey all the evidence, the thought insistently arises that some supernatural agency must be involved. Is it possible that suddenly, without intending to, we have stumbled upon scientific proof of the existence of a Supreme Being?"

The second way that God reveals Himself through His creation occurs when the creation itself testifies to His greatness. Throughout the Old Testament numerous passages of Scripture speak about mountains and hills and trees and cattle and birds and all kinds of living creatures praising the Lord. And in the New Testament, in Revelation 5:13 John writes, "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them singing, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever.'" In other words, when you hear that robin sweetly singing outside your window, is he just making a joyful noise or is he making a joyful noise unto the Lord, testifying to the truth that God is the Creator of the universe.

Finally, God reveals Himself through phenomenon. He becomes directly and personally involved in His creation, and that's what took place when He came down upon the mountain on the third day. In fact, from the very beginning God has been personally involved with His creation. It is

expressed beautifully in Genesis 2: 7 when this verse of Scripture declares, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." And it continues over and over again as God employs the forces of nature to express His purposes and plans for mankind. There are countless examples throughout the pages of both the Old and New Testaments such as when the Lord increases the daylight so that Joshua can defeat Israel's enemies or when Paul and Silas are freed from their imprisonment by an earthquake.

These, however, were future events which had to be preceded by what was taking place at Mount Sinai, and that brings me to the second thing that I want to share with you this morning. The Lord actually spoke to His people as they were gathered before Him. But what kind of voice did He use when speaking to the Israelites? When the Scriptures say that Moses spoke to God and the voice of the Lord answered him, the Hebrew word that is translated as voice is "qol," and it can mean one of three things—words that are spoken, a sound that is heard, or the rumble of thunder. Now I wasn't there so I can't tell you exactly what happened, but this is what I think took place. Moses spoke to God just like I am speaking to you and the Lord responded in words that Moses could understand. However, to everyone else God's response sounded like thunder. My interpretation as to what took place at the mountain is based upon two other Scriptural accounts. The first is found in John 12:28-29. Jesus hears the voice of God affirming Him and His mission here on earth. But to the people around him it sounded like thunder or perhaps a message from an angel. The same kind of thing seems to have taken place to Paul on the road to Damascus as recorded in Acts 22:6-10. Not only was there a bright light but a voice from heaven, the voice of Jesus who spoke directly and personally to Paul. However, others within his group only heard a sound that was not discernable.

I shall never forget the young theological student from Japan who spoke with the Lord during a thunder storm. I was on my way returning to the dorm at the seminary where I was studying to be a pastor. Big dark storm clouds were racing across the sky, and it was beginning to rain, a real downpour. We all started running for the shelter of the dorm, but one student, a young man from Japan turned and faced the approaching storm. He began to praise the Lord in a loud voice as torrents of rain poured down from the heavens. Perhaps it was something like that which transpired as Moses spoke with the Lord. In any case, like the rest of us who ran for cover during the thunder storm, the people of Israel were more than just a

little frightened. They were absolutely terrified, and that is the final thing I want to share with you.

We need to properly respect the Lord. How many times have you heard someone use the Lord's name in vain? How many times have you heard someone refer to God as "the man upstairs?" How many times have you run into someone who described God as a rather benign grandfather who has nothing better to do than dote on his grandchildren? I'm afraid that many people, including some of God's people, take the Lord for granted. They don't really appreciate who He really is and the awesome power and majesty which He possesses. That's why we need to pay attention to passages of Scripture like the one we have heard this morning and like that very famous passage of Scripture in the sixth chapter of Isaiah. In the year that king Uzziah died, Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple." He was overcome by this vision of God's majesty, and he cried out, "Woe to me. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:1-5). In response to what he had seen and heard, Isaiah was filled with a sense of awe and godly fear, much like what the Israelites experienced as they gathered in the Lord's presence at the Mountain of God.

You and I may not like the word "fear," but it is used throughout the Bible, especially with regards to our relationship with the Lord. For example, Proverbs 9:10 declares, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." What does that mean? It can mean one of three things. First, we should fear the Lord because He is great and powerful, and to be confronted by Him or even by one of His angelic messengers is like stepping into the presence of something so awesome that just being there is overwhelming. Even Moses was forbidden to look upon the face, the absolute glory of God, because He could not have survived that kind of an encounter (Exodus 33:12-23). Throughout the Scriptures experiencing God's presence has generated that same kind of response. For example, the first thing that God's angel said to the shepherds at the birth of Christ was "fear not."

Second, we should fear the Lord because He is holy and we are not. We are sinners and that sin stands between us and the Lord. Indeed, as Paul declares in the book of Romans, the sins of mankind generate the wrath of God. Now I know that we always want to hear that the Lord loves us and will take care of us, and, indeed, He does and He will. But we should never forget that sin is an anathema to God. He detests it and will punish those

who embrace it. That's what Moses was telling the Israelites when He said that God was testing them by displaying His power. The Lord wanted them to know that He had the strength and power to handle the misbehavior of mankind. And that same message was re-iterated by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him" (Luke 12:4-5).

Fortunately there is a third kind of fear, and I hope that it is the kind of fear that each and every one of us can embrace. It is the kind of fear that is born out of a loving respect for the beloved. It's like a person saying, "I don't want to do or say anything that will disappoint you. I will refrain from those actions and attitudes that meet with your disapproval. I am dreadfully fearful of anything that could potential harm or injure our relationship with one another." It's the kind of godly fear that Jesus described when He said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work" (John 4:34). None of us will probably be able to reach the heights of that level of spiritual devotion, but down through the years I've met some people who were definitely striving to live that kind of life. In particular, I remember one lady who loved the Lord so much that she would immediately do everything within her power to seek forgiveness for anything which she had done or said which might be construed as sinful. She had a deep and abiding respect for the Lord, and she wanted her life to honor Him.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer issues a very stern warning. He says, "It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). He is referring to those who have turned their backs on the Lord and have rejected the salvation offered unto us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes indeed, that would be a fearful thing, standing before the Lord to receive His judgment for rejecting His priceless gift of salvation. In fact, it would be far more fearful than anything that the Israelites experienced when they met the Lord at the Mountain of God. But thanks be to God, for He has redeemed us from our sins and welcomed us into His presence through Christ Jesus, His Son and our Savior. Therefore, if you have not genuinely and personally entrusted your life into God's care by professing your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, now would be a good time to do so. Don't delay! Otherwise, you may be facing an experience that is more terrifying than anything which you can possibly imagine.