

Trembling before the Consuming Fire of God (Exodus 19:16-25)

Open to Ex 19. I want to open with times in my life I had some sense of some of this chapter.

- In 1980 I faintly remember exiting church to see Mt. Helens erupt fiery ash over WA.
- The morning of 9/11/2001 I was rocked by images of thick dark clouds over NY.
- In CA I remember one morning waking up during a violent earthquake,
 - o I instantly thought I was going to meet my Maker and feared that I wasn't ready.
- In the Philippines we were shaken by an earthquake where I saw ground buckle and split.
- I remember vividly some near-death experiences that made me tremble, and long after.
- One of the most terrifying was a thunder and lightning strike near me as a little guy.

In Ex 19 that and more at the same time is a wake up call

Give your attention and reverence to God's holy Word. **Ex 19:16:** *On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.* ¹⁷ *Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.* ¹⁸ *Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.* ¹⁹ *And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.* ²⁰ *The 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.* ²¹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish."* ²² *Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them."* ²³ *And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'"* ²⁴ *And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them."* ²⁵ *So Moses went down to the people and told them. [chapter 20]* ¹ *And God spoke all these words, saying,* ² *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* ³ *"You shall have no other gods before me.*

We'll stop there and take our time the rest of this summer to study these 10 commandments

- but we need to first study the Commander giving commandments.
- Before God says 'you shall' He starts with 'I am.'
- God is impressing upon them who He is in ch 19 and then what man must do.

We'll see the Law later in ch 20-24, today in ch 19 we see the Lawgiver in His blazing holiness.

Before wisdom for living, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

In the 1530s John Calvin began his Institutes of the Christian Religion with this line: 'true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...Hence that dread and wonder with which Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God... man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty.'¹ That's what Ex 19 did for Israel and does for us, to bring to the knees and to burn away all else before God.

It shows us 1) God is a consuming fire, 2) God is speaking, 3) God is extending grace

Ex 19-20 is a world-changer. It altered ancient civilizations and continues to impact the modern world. It's been said 'This event is a historical/divine encounter initiated by God that forever influences the rest of Israel's history...and...influenced Israel's theology...nearly as much as the exodus event... The majestic and awesome displays of lightning, thunder, smoke, fire, trumpet sounds, and the quaking of Mount Sinai ... provoke the sensory perceptions of God's people to pay attention ... He has made himself known in this way so that they will fear him'²

Which takes us to our 1st point and response: God is a consuming fire – we should fear

In the end of v. 16 the people fear at this traumatic scene, as if volcanic lava will consume them.

¹⁷ *Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.* ¹⁸ *Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. [it's as if God is about to erupt]*

That language *smoke of a kiln* is only used in one other place in scripture, Sodom and Gomorrah

- as fire and brimstone rained down and smoke from consumed sinners.
- The NT uses terms like that for hellfire and judgment as the Lord comes down again.
- God is holy and unapproachable by sinners, and it's not just God the Father in the OT.
 - o The NT says God the Son is '*King of kings and Lord of lords, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see*' (1 Tim 6:16).

Jesus now is in a place of unapproachable light and eyes of sinful man God's glory cannot see.

In Isa 6 even perfect angels cover their faces before the holy holy holy Lord on the throne

In v. 21 Moses warns the people if they try to even look at God's holy presence they will perish.

²² *Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.*

Same verb used of Uzzah who touched the ark and God broke out against him in death, 2 Sam 6

In Moses' lifetime, some offered 'strange fire' and God's fire consumed them instantly

In a few chapters God will lay out His tabernacle

- and to enter required authorized burnt offering for fire to consume.
- In His holy place candle flames were to be kept burning by the priests.
- His burning glory was in the most holy place and the thick cloud extended to heaven.
- The end of v. 23 talks about boundaries for people and priests (like the later tabernacle).
- Only the high priest could enter one time a year, the Day of Atonement,
 - o but he could die in there if not very careful.

Vividly and visually the message is God is a consuming fire we should fear

²⁴ *And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them."*

- When it mentions Aaron and the "priests," it may mean the Levites
 - o or Aaron and his sons who would eat before God in Ex 24.
- When did God choose Aaron and his sons or his tribe of Levi?
 - o It doesn't say here, but 1 Sam 2:27-28 says while Israel was in Egypt, God chose Aaron to be father of the priests out of all the tribes.
- Ex 2 emphasizes both parents of Moses and Aaron were of the tribe of Levi.

In Ex 4:14 God speaks of "*Aaron the Levite*" who would speak for God to Pharaoh with Moses.

- Israel was to be a kingdom of priests in a general sense that we saw last time, but
- there's a special sense where only the tribe of Levi could come close to God's holy place
- Only Aaron's sons could be priests in the holy place
 - o and only the high priest in holy of holies (Aaron comes here).

But even priests can be consumed by God's fire if not careful (Aaron's 2 sons later)

Dt 4 also comments on this event at Sinai and says '*your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.*' Dt 5 says as God's voice and fire at Sinai made them fear and cry out '*why should we die? For **this great fire will consume us.** If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die.*' God tells Moses, '*I have heard the words*

of this people, which they have spoken to you. **They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them...**'

God says they're right to say God is a consuming fire who they could and should die before.

- This wasn't just for then, God says this is always the heart to have, to fear and obey.
- Oh that we had this heart always!
- God says this is right and it will go well with them who rightly fear God.

This is what the NT says, too, in Heb 10:26 *For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,* ²⁷ *but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries...* ³⁰ *For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people."* ³¹ **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'** (ESV).

Heb 12 talks about this scene at Sinai, and v. 28 calls NT Christians to '*serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.* ²⁹ *For our God is a consuming fire*' (NKJV). Not was in the OT, He is a consuming fire to fear.

That's #1, now 2ndly God's people see in Ex 19: God is speaking to us – we should tremble

Earlier Moses trembled when God spoke at a burning bush (Acts 7:32), but this is much bigger! Jeremiah Burroughs: 'mountains shook and trembled when the Law of God was given, and God expects that the hearts of sinners should tremble when they hear the Law of God at any time...' ³³

End of v. 16: '*...all the people in the camp trembled.*' End of v. 18: '*... the whole mountain trembled greatly.* ¹⁹ *And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.* ²⁰ *The 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.* ²¹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people..."*

How important God's message is and how reverent men must be as it goes forth

Matthew Henry: 'Never was there such a sermon preached, before nor since, as this which was here preached... For, The preacher was God himself... The pulpit... was mount Sinai ... The introductions to the service were *thunders and lightnings* ... The congregation was called together by the *sound of a trumpet*... Moses brought the hearers to the place of meeting ... [as] God's minister, who is spoken to, to command silence, and keep the congregation in order...' ³⁴

God says in Jer 5:22 'Do you not fear me? ... Do you not tremble before me?'

Moses trembled. Heb 12:21 says '*so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."* ... ²⁵ *See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.* ²⁶ *At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."*

There will be an end times earthquake, and universe-shake, all creation trembles (Rev 6-11)

1st sermon I preached as pastor here was on Isaiah 66:2 where God speaks these words: '*to this one I will look: him who is humble and contrite and who trembles at my word...hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble...*'

This was my proposition then and now: The great and pressing need of the hour is to have a high view of God and high view of God's Word, to tremble and be humble (low view of self).

- Isaiah saw God high and exalted, smoke, foundations trembled, he said '*woe is me*' (6:5)
- Daniel hears God's Word, '*while he was speaking this word to me, I stood trembling*' (10:11 NAS)
- Jeremiah: '*All my bones tremble...Because of the Lord And because of his holy words*' (23:9 NAS)
- Psalm 119:120 '*My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your law*' (NIV, sounds like Ex 19)
- Saul of Tarsus hears the Word of the Lord and asks trembling what to do (Acts 9:6 NKJV)
- Godly fear and trembling leads to obedience with reverence to do whatever God speaks

- He's saved and renamed Paul and gave Christ's word with fear and trembling (1 Cor 2:3)
To this one God looks: the humble and contrite who trembles at His Word

In 1819 Adoniram Judson baptized his first convert in Burma. His wife Anne wrote of the conversion: "I was reading with him Christ's Sermon on the Mount. He was deeply impressed and unusually solemn. 'These words,' said he, 'take hold on my liver; they make me **tremble**.'"⁵

- has the word of Christ taken hold of you? Or do you take it for granted, treat it lightly?
 - if you never tremble at the word, you're not humble and contrite, may He grab your liver
- James 2 says even the demons believe God and tremble, what is our belief if we never tremble?
- we should tremble at our sin, and fear hearing His Word casually, superficially, flippantly
 - if you lack seriousness and reverence, come in repentance, let this wake you, shake you

Prayer to apply: Ps 119:38 NAS *Establish Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence for You*
v. 161 *My hearts stands in awe of Your words* (NIV 'my heart trembles at your word'; cf. Isa. 66:5)

We all sin here, but we can come to Jesus like the trembling woman in Mk 5:33 He commends

- Jesus commands His followers to fear and 'take heed how you hear' His word, Lk 8:18 NKJV
- Take care how you listen. Were you in prayer for your heart and hearing today? Israel prepared in fear and trembling before they came to meet and hear God, so must we (even night before).
Burroughs: 'when you come to sermons to hear the Word of God, oh, labor to keep your hearts in a constant trembling frame, and the Word that you now tremble at will...comfort your heart'⁶

Godly fear falls forward in faith to the God who lifts worshippers up in His grace

That takes us to a final observation in Ex 19: God is extending grace – we should worship

²⁴ *And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you..."*

God extends grace by letting a mediator (Moses) and high priest (Aaron) come for the people.

- God is a consuming fire but is coming in grace.
- God is graciously providing a way for Israel to worship and not die.
- Ch 20 sets up true worship of one true God who will have no other gods before Him.
 - o But sinners need a mediator to bring them to God and to speak to them from God.

This is a picture and preview of our New Covenant Mediator and High Priest

The context of 19:17 is all the people coming to meet God.

- But they need another to draw near.

If they approach on their own, they're dead. After Dt 4 says God is a consuming fire, it goes on 'your God is a merciful God...ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?...Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words...[next verse] because he loved... and chose [Israel, Dt 4 asks] what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us...'

Ps 2:11 Worship the LORD with reverence And rejoice with trembling (NAS)

- We rejoice that this God we fear has come so near!

That voice from heaven that makes men and mountains tremble also makes us chosen people!

- He speaks from the fire that consumes sinners and He calls sinners to salvation.
- Instead of destroying us, He disciplines us as loved children.

The wages deserved for sin is death, but this is a word of undeserved life, so we should worship

What wondrous love! Amazing grace! What a great unheard of merciful God we have!

Al Mohler imagines a modern Christian asking an ancient Jew ‘what’d you get out of worship’?

- The Israelite might reply: ‘I’m just glad I got out of worship alive!’
- I got out of worship and I’m not dead, PTL!’

Americans ask ‘what did the worship do for you? Did you like the presentation or instruments?’

- Israelite: I couldn’t stand the trumpet! The volume was overwhelming with thundering!
- I wasn’t comfortable at all! It was too dark and smoky to see
 - o but PTL I got to worship and got out alive!

That doesn’t fit with consumer-driven or seeker-friendly ‘worship’

Those models tried to make a church where people would never be bored

- by making worship casual, light, entertaining.
- But in the Bible when people truly met God, they were never bored!
- People need to know the weight of meeting God.

Biblical worship isn’t about you, how you feel or what pleases you, it’s about God!

- It’s how you fear God and what pleases Him!
- It’s not about your songs, it’s about our Savior!
- It’s not liking the musical style or beat,
 - o it’s praising God that you met Him and still have a heartbeat!
- No concert with a fog machine can compete with Ex 19
- No laser show or light jokes can compare to God’s lightning and smoke here
- No cheap substitute can replace worship of the real holy God who extends grace.

And Moses’ readers might have listened for grace as they read v. 15 about *the third day*.

- Earlier in Gen 22 he wrote how their father Abraham came to another mount with Isaac.
 - *On the third day*, grace was extended by a ram God provided as a substitute.
 - Later readers of the Bible know a greater grace on another mount.
 - At Calvary Jesus died as substitute to extend saving grace,
 - o and *on the third day* He rose to meet His people.
 - o There was another earthquake that third day, and much fear and trembling⁷
- Like those women at the empty tomb, we should worship Christ for His grace

Ex 19:1 says Israel came to Sinai the 3rd month after they left Egypt to the day.

- The ESV Study Bible says Ex 19 coincides with the Feast of Weeks,
 - o the day Jews celebrate God giving the Law

50 days after Passover (the day Israel left Egypt) is that feast Jews called Pentecost in NT times.

- In Ex 19 God’s fire came down over a mount,
- but on the anniversary of the day in Acts 2 God’s fire came down over men and women.
- What was once 1 big flame at Sinai divides into little flames over every believer
- His presence that once consumed now comes inside, the Holy Spirit
- He burns away sin instead of burning sinners to death!
- In the OT God warned believers not to come close, in the NT He comes close!
- The God who dwells in unapproachable light approaches us through Christ.
- God’s Holy Spirit dwells in us permanently.

Turn to Heb 12. God became flesh and dwelt among us and now dwells in us as believers

Rev 4: *I was in the Spirit, and behold...flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and...burning...fire* [that represents the Holy Spirit and that sounds like Ex 19 and holy angels keep saying ‘holy, holy, holy’] In Rev 5 no one in the universe is worthy to approach the unapproachable God except His Son and innumerable angels worship ‘with a loud voice “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth...saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped. [and so should we worship!]

We’re already citizens of heaven by grace and should worship like it now

Look at Heb 12:18: *you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest*¹⁹ *and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.*²⁰ *For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain [Sinai], it shall be stoned.”*²¹ *Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”*²² *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,*²³ *and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,*²⁴ *and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...*

OT Israel couldn’t touch what NT believers have, every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies!

Ryken: ‘One mountain was dark and stormy; the other is a city of bright and shining joy [Zion, the place of grace]. One mountain was a place of fear and danger; the other is a place of peace and safety. On one mountain the angels blazed with fire and blasted with noise; on the other they form a welcoming party for a celebration. One mountain was designed to keep people away; the other was designed to draw them close...[through v. 24, blood of a new covenant]’⁸

Newton: Let us praise, and join the chorus
Of the saints enthroned on high;
Here they trusted Him before us,
Now their praises fill the sky ...
Let us love and sing and wonder,
Let us praise the Savior’s name!
He has hushed the law’s loud thunder,
He has quenched Mount Sinai’s flame:
He has washed us in his blood. He has brought us [near] to God...⁹

²⁸ *Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,*²⁹ *for our God is a consuming fire.*

God is a consuming fire – we should fear

God is speaking to us – we should tremble (v. 25 says don’t refuse him who is speaking)

God is extending grace – we should worship (we can come confidently but not casually)

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35, 38–39.

² Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus 19-40*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Lexham Press), 21, 23, 55.

³ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Fear*, 11.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 123.

⁵ John Piper, "The Holy Spirit: Author of Scripture" (preached 2/26/84)

⁶ Burroughs, p. 24.

⁷ Matthew 28:1-9, Mark 16:8.

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 519–521.

⁹ John Newton, "Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder."