

## Prayer

I will praise You, Lord Jesus Christ,  
despite the many troubles that sadden my heart:  
for when evils, wrongs and trials affect me, as they surely do,  
the faith You have given me lifts me up to greater things  
until I stand triumphant over every enemy!  
Alleluia!

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Spend time praising God using psalms, hymns or songs. If possible, do this with someone else, perhaps at home with someone you love.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the police.** *Pray for those who provide for your security, especially the police and law enforcement agencies.*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of His Word*
- *Pray for the software industry, those who work in it, and its effects on society*

## Meditation

We celebrate what Jesus Christ has done always for us:

He has placed His hand on us before we knew Him;  
He has been faithful to us even when we have failed;  
He has done far more with us than we can understand;  
He has opened His arms to us with constant generosity;  
He has enabled us to stand firm when evil is at hand;  
He has always been there for us when we have needed Him;  
He has not withheld His mercies from us even if we've failed;

Celebrate what He's done and worship Him forever!

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## Bible passage – Exodus 20:18-21

<sup>18</sup> When all the people saw peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, and the blast of the trumpet and the smoking mountain, they trembled with fear and took their stance at a distance. <sup>19</sup> The people said to Moses, 'You speak to us yourself, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and so that the fear of God will remain before you and prevent you from sinning.' <sup>21</sup> Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick cloud where God was.

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## Bible Study

### Review

This is only a short passage, and it stands at the end of the Ten Commandments together with another brief passage concerning the making altars (20:22-26 – see tomorrow). The distinctive feature of today's few verses is the people's reactions to the giving of the Ten Commandments; they were terrified and they kept

their stance away from God on the mountain 'at a distance' (20:18). This reaction is an essential part of the human story of the people of Israel in these extraordinary circumstances, and we will look at these few verses in order to understand why the people reacted in this way. Also, the text reveals a basic truth about the purpose of the Ten Commandments, and indeed the whole of the Law, which is that they are like a moral standard, a 'test', designed to prevent the people from sinning by making them aware of what is right and wrong before God (20:20). This is very important for a Christian understanding of the Old Testament Law, and it confirms that although the Law identifies sin, it does not of itself overcome the essential divide between God and people because of sin. Only Christ does that.

So far in the book of Exodus, we have read an unfolding drama that has kept us enthralled. God remembered His dispirited and leaderless people in Egypt, He gave them a leader in Moses and enabled them to escape on a night of miracles and wonders, He outwitted Pharaoh and defeated His armies as they crossed the Red Sea, and the people discovered His miraculous provision whilst travelling through the Sinai! But this is only one half of the book of Exodus; the people were only just beginning to learn how to relate to their awesome God, as we see in our text today. The rest of Exodus (chapters 21 to 40) is mainly a list of laws designed to help the people of Israel live in the presence of their God; but they were frightened to do this, and begged Moses' help to handle the awesome task of being God's people (20:19). Furthermore, the division between God, the people and Moses became clearer and more defined; a relationship of awesome fear (20:20) existing between God and His people, with Moses acting as a 'go-between', like a priest (20:21). Later in Exodus, the tribe of Levi and Aaron in particular (and their descendants) were 'ordained' to continue the priesthood and stand between God and the people 'forever'. This enabled a fixed system of God, Law, Priesthood and People to be established, and this remained until the days of Jesus.

Now chapter 20, in which we find the Ten Commandments, is one half of the way through Exodus, which has 40 chapters, so there are plenty of laws for us to read! However, the second half of Exodus is not only a list of laws. These are punctuated by some fascinating and critical incidents, which teach us a great deal about the relationship between God and His people; principally here at the end of chapter 20, chapter 24, and chapters 32 to 34. As we read these elements of the 'storyline', we will discover that the giving of the Law was not straightforward, and we have not yet heard the last of how the Ten Commandments were given by God, conveyed by Moses, or received by the people!

#### ***A note about forthcoming studies***

In chapters 21 to 23 we read a series of social and religious laws designed to keep together a group of people classed according to modern analyses, as 'bronze age'. From chapters 25 to 27 we read God's instructions for making the 'Ark of the Covenant' in which to keep God's Laws, and a tent complex called the 'Tabernacle' in which to house the Ark. After this, God gives instructions about the priesthood and the use of the sanctuary in the Tabernacle (chapters 28 to 31), and the same themes are revisited in chapters 35 to 40. Many of these laws are highly instructive, and they are a great help in understanding the New Testament. However, some are detailed and a little repetitive, so for this reason, our study of these will take a slightly different form. Each day, we will take sample readings from the important and significant texts within these chapters and study these, but the full text will always be available in the 'going deeper' section of the Bible study, for those who wish to ensure that they have covered the whole text!

#### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Does this passage conclude Exodus 20:1-18, or begin the rest of Exodus?
- What is God doing at this point in the story?
- What are the people of Israel afraid of?
- What is Moses' role here in this story?

### **Notes on the text and translation**

**V18** *'peals of thunder and flashes of lightning'* This translation is the same as that found in 19:16, and I have used the plural Hebrew used here to indicate the 'peals' of thunder and 'flashes' of lightening, as before in the notes for that verse. However, it is intriguing that the word used for the lightening here is a rare and strange word in Hebrew, and not the same one used in 19:16. It is used in Genesis 15 to speak of the mysterious torch or flame that passed between the two halves of Abraham's sacrifice to indicate acceptance of the Covenant between God and Abraham.

**V20** *'so that the fear of God will remain before you ...'* God is not mentioned here by name, but it is indisputable that what other translations give as the 'fear of Him' is in fact the 'fear of God'. So because it makes the whole sentence clear in English, I have written this.

## Going Deeper

### ***Does this passage conclude Exodus 20:1-18, or begin the rest of Exodus?***

Different versions of the Bible have headings placed within the sacred text to help the reader find where they are. Some of them include our passage today as following on from the Ten Commandments, and others head this passage something like this; 'Moses prepares to give the Law'! It seems unnecessary to make such false divisions, however. The description of the people of Israel in fear and trembling before the awesome manifestations of God on the mountain of Sinai (20:18) make it clear to us that the presence of God on Mount Sinai continued throughout the giving of the Ten Commandments and did not stop for some time. The few verses of our text serve the function of reminding us of this by specifically referring to the fourfold evidence of God's presence, in thunder, lightening, the sound of the trumpet and the smoking mountain, as previously described in 19:16. As we saw when studying 19:16 (and see below), these four are highly symbolic, and the most powerful and awesome of demonstrations of God's presence on Sinai.

In the coming chapters (21 to 23) we hear of other laws being given through Moses, before he went part way up the mountain with others (24:1f.), eventually, stayed up the mountain for 40 days (24:18) to receive the engraved tablets with the Commandments written on them (31:18). This is the only 'time frame' we are given in Exodus, and as we cross between the chapters in this way to try and find out the details of 'what happened next', it seems best to think of verse 18 as a reminder of God's presence that overshadowed the whole 'lawgiving' event.

### ***What is God doing at this point in the story?***

Some scholars have analysed this and other texts that speak of God's presence in powerful ways, and have concluded that the Hebrew words used here describe what we would call a 'deafening noise'. If you have stood on a hillside at the very moment when that hill has been hit with lightening in the midst of a thunderstorm, you will know how frightening it is; this has happened to me once, and I remember quaking for some time afterwards! Also, the words used here (and elsewhere in Exodus) for the sound of the trumpet or the speaking of God's voice, have been described by these scholars as indicating a deafening noise (e.g. see Amos 1:1,2, and the fall of Jericho's walls at the sound of the trumpets, Joshua 6:20). Is it possible that the combination of these noises was the reason why the people remained in the place assigned to them at the foot of the mountain (see 19:17)?

Why did God appear to the people in this awe-inspiring way? We must remember that the people of Israel were just beginning to become acquainted with the God of their fathers, Abraham and Isaac (etc.). They went down to Egypt as the family of Jacob and became a nation of many people (600,000 according to Exodus 12:37). Their heritage had little of what we would recognise as Judaism, and their knowledge of God was clearly limited. It is likely that the four descriptions of God's presence in verse 18 all had symbolic meaning that was understood by the people of the day, and this is why they respected what was happening on Mount Sinai, and did not just pass it off as a natural phenomenon (as too many try to do today).

The peals of thunder and flashes of lightening were acts of both natural and supernatural power (lightning and thunderstorm). These would have been understood naturally as 'acts of God' (as people still do to this day), but these particular manifestations indicated that God had power over all creation, and it was important that the people had before them this demonstration of God's creative power. To this day, all God's people worship Him as the Creator of earth and heaven. It is also just possible that the word used for the lightning here (see notes above) reflect the awesome authority of God acting in Covenant power. The fact that this word was used at Abraham's 'Covenant', and at this event (which will later be called a Covenant in Exodus 24:7,8) is no coincidence.

The idea of the 'smoking' mountain kept before the people the idea that God was pure and holy. Earlier in chapter 19, we were reminded that the smoke was not merely cloud, like the cloud that had guided the people through the desert, but the smoke of a kiln (19:16). The people of Israel had been labourers in Egypt, and they knew what a kiln did to dry and harden materials, or in the case of metals, refine them. These ideas therefore contributed to the idea of the unapproachable purity and holiness of God, something reinforced by the moral authority of the Law, given in the Ten Commandments.

Lastly, the deafening sounding of the trumpets was a continual call to respond to the presence of God by the offering of worship. The people of Israel had been called to worship God at Sinai, but not just to perform some sacrifices and then pack up and go on their way. The on-going saga of the book of Exodus recounts many weeks at the foot of Sinai with this continual noise, and this is a reminder to Israel that their God was to be worshipped all the time, not just as when they wished.

### ***What are the people of Israel afraid of?***

All this, of course, was evidence of the presence of the God of whom the people were afraid. Today, we know that we can see God through Jesus, and this makes it possible for us to hold a more human picture in our minds. The ancient people of Israel did not have a picture of God like this, or even of a man with a long white beard either, for this comes from Daniel 7, a prophecy of much later times! They did not know what to expect of this God who had evidently saved them from slavery and given them sustenance in their desert journey; God was at once approachable and unapproachable, understandable and not understandable. The dichotomy exists to this day within Judaism, as can be seen in the actions of devout Jews praying at the 'Wailing Wall', the only verifiable part of Herod's Temple still standing to this day within Jerusalem. They pray standing before the wall, rocking forward on their feet as they pray and then moving back sharply as they get closer to the holy relic, for fear they might touch the things of God.

In the face of their dilemma, a God who was to be approached but was unapproachably holy, the ancient people of Israel begged Moses to speak the words of God to them, and feared that if God spoke to them directly they would die. If you read the first verse of chapter 20, you will find that God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments to all the people, and it was because of hearing the power of these words that the people feared God in this way. It was why they implored Moses to act as an intermediary in future, for the sheer power of what they had heard left them very afraid. We may say that the words of the Ten Commandments by themselves are not that difficult to hear, but we have not heard them in the setting, which is described here; we were not there! What the people asked for was indeed granted, and we will read from chapter 21 onwards that after the Ten Commandments, Moses gave all the later commands, under instruction from God. It is not just a tradition that says that the Ten Commandments are special because they are the 'Words of God'. Exodus records them as such, quite separate from the other laws.

### ***What is Moses' role here in this story?***

What is happening here is that Moses is increasingly taking on the role of what later generations will call a 'priest', and a task that he eventually passes on to Aaron and through him to future generations of Levites and his own family. The task of a priest is to minister the things of God to the people and also to represent the people to God. This is what Moses does throughout the 'lawgiving' here in Exodus.

Moses' words here in this passage are very significant; 'Do not be afraid for God has come in order to test you, and so that the fear of God will remain before you and prevent you from sinning.' In the light of what we have already seen, these words confirm that God's awesome presence on the mountain is indeed a test for the people. These words are prophetic, for we will discover later on in Exodus that the people's ability to sustain their faith in God is somewhat limited, and Moses was entirely correct about being tested. The Law that He gave Israel from God was not the means whereby they could have a perfect relationship with God; the prophets of later generations spotted this very well (e.g. see Isaiah 1). The Law was a test, a moral and religious test of God's people, and its purpose was to reveal God's truth about the world, about God and about relationships, to the people. If they acted according to the Law, then they would pass the test, if they did not, then they would fail. This is not my opinion here in this study, but the general theme of the book of Deuteronomy, in which Moses sets this out in the form of a straight challenge to the people of Israel, to 'choose life' (Deuteronomy 30:19). The Law is a test.

Moses' role here was to tell the people the purpose of the law. This Scripture is important, because by the time of Jesus, the Israelites had created a religion out of keeping the law, rather than seeking a relationship with God through the whole covenant He had given them. In so doing they failed the test set them by God and Moses, for the law could only identify sin, and although some parts of the law (the ritual laws in Leviticus) offered people hope for the forgiveness from certain forms of sin, the law could never offer a comprehensive solution to it. The law is information, not spiritual power or authority; but Jesus came to solve the conundrum of the law and sin; as we now know, and as Paul so eloquently explained in many of his writings (Rom 3:19f., Gal 3:10f. etc.).

## **Application**

This is a small though not insignificant piece of Exodus. One simple thing we can take from it is the fact that God does not go away, and that our worship of Him must be constant. However, the main response of every Christian must surely be to thank God that we have a 'priest' in Jesus. We do not have Moses as our priest, but as Hebrews explains, we have Jesus, and because of this, we do not have to fear God as the ancient people of Israel did. I say this cautiously, because it seems that although the purpose of Jesus was to enable us to come into God's presence with peace (Romans 5:1,2) without fear of God's awesome power and glory, it is possible for us to regress and find ourselves living in fear of God. There is much to be done in the life of every Christian soul, but if we stand in the way of what God would do in our lives, then one option some people take is to live a legalistic, Judaistic type of Christianity according to rules and regulations and without a troublesome relationship with God. Yes, we can make the same mistakes as the Israelites of old!

We are not perfect, and we still stand at the foot of the mountain, as it were, awaiting the time when we will climb up and meet our God. We know that Moses has gone before, but it is not his priesthood that has granted us access. For us, it is Christ who is our 'great High Priest' (Hebrews 4:14), and because we already know what He has done for us, we may have perfect confidence that we may approach the throne of God, the summit of Sinai, to meet Him who is our Maker, the Pure and Holy One, who is worthy of all our praise!

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, discuss what you would have felt like if you had been part of the people of Israel at the time described by this text.
2. How do we hear the voice of God, and are we like the Israelites who retreat from it, or like Moses, who moves towards it?
3. To what extent is God still within a 'thick white cloud' in which He cannot be seen? Is this a fair description of the God we see in Jesus? If not, why not?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I thank God for what Jesus has done for me and for many others. Each of us can only experience what happens to us, personally, yet the fact that God has consistently touched the lives of His people for centuries makes me feel that I have something in common, even with people of Old Testament times. They did not have Christ, but they saw something of God. I am sure they had good intent, but from their perspective, things did not yet 'add up' as they do to us today. It is my hope, based on Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter 11), that those who experienced great things in Old Testament times received justice at His hands according to their experience of Him.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *What does this text say to you about how close you are to God? Dwell on this thought for the day, and do not let yourself be fooled by quick or easy answers. Look for what the Lord says to you through it.*
- *Pray for the people of Israel today, the majority of whom do not accept the priesthood of Jesus and still live under the priesthood of Moses and the ancestors of Aaron. Pray that all God's people will one day be one.*

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## Final Prayer

Be at the centre of my life, Lord Jesus; and by Your Holy Spirit, be with me in my happiness and my joy, my thinking and my doing, my speaking and my listening, and my actions and my words. Then, when everything is finished at the end of the day, speak to me Lord Jesus. Speak Your Words of Life. AMEN

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