

Text: Exodus 20:18-26

Title: "The mediator's 'Fear not'"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: Did you ever see a sight that made you physically tremble or run for cover? Soldiers on battlefields know what that is like. The closest I have come was seeing that second airplane hit the second tower in New York City twenty years ago. I saw it live on television, not in person, and so I did not have the same physical trembling and urge to flee that those in the vicinity of the towers had on that morning. Brave first responders resisted those fears and ran toward the tragedy, many giving their lives to save others.

What the Israelites saw at Sinai affected them the way that 9/11 affected those who saw that act of terrorism in person. There is an angry thunderstorm on the mountain, the sound of a trumpet, billowing smoke and fire, and the voice of God. They tremble and want to run away. They think they are going to die.

After 9/11, our nation's president eventually stood on the rubble of the towers, put his arm around one of the brave firefighters, and with a megaphone did his best to instill courage in a country hit by the terror of terrorism. Our nation responded to this act of war with acts of great courage. With the sacrifice of much blood and treasure, we gave the tribes of Afghanistan an opportunity to unite and to live as a free nation, but now we are finding out that they have failed to courageously receive that gift. The sacrifice of many kept our nation safe for twenty years. We need to pray for Americans and Afghanis now trapped under the tyranny of the Taliban's Islamic sharia law.

On this Exodus 20 day at Sinai, Moses seeks to instill a kind of courage in the trembling people he has led out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery, whom God was going to birth into a great nation, but who sensed a need to distance themselves from their Redeemer. Moses meets the need of the day, not only as Israel's leader, but also as Israel's mediator. Moses is a go-between, between the people of the exodus and their God.

The relationship between the God of the Bible and His people always requires a mediator. As Israel's mediator, Moses reminds us of the one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus; and in this capacity Moses has one simple message for the people at Sinai: "Fear not" (v. 20). I want us to understand four things about the mediator's "Fear not" this morning.

I. The need for the mediator's "Fear not" (vv. 18-19).

Illustration: 9/11 was a wakeup call for our nation. Some intelligence officials were mindful of the danger we faced, but our nation failed to understand the many warning signs leading up to that tragic event. If on 9/10 we understood what we did on 9/11, the tragedy may have been avoided.

Application: In our passage, it is still Israel's 9/10. They are being made to tremble by the scene on Mount Sinai in a timely way that will ultimately prove helpful to them. The appearance of Sinai teaches them that their lives are in danger, and they were. Their lives were in danger because God is holy, and man is sinful. Our lives are in danger for the same reason. God's holiness is lethal for sinful man. Sinai was Israel's wakeup call, and it is ours too. It is still 9/10. Tragic judgment against sin required by God's holiness has not yet fallen on Israel. Sinai is our wakeup call too.

In his recounting of these events in Deuteronomy 5, Moses gives some further details about what God sought to teach the Israelites by making them tremble (Deut. 5:22-28). God wanted His people to understand what it means to be mere human flesh (v. 26). Human flesh is sinful and weak (see Isa. 40:6-8). Human flesh deserves to die before the condemnation of the voice of holy God. This is the need that necessitates the mediator's "Fear not."

Have we ever learned to tremble in this way? Have we ever heeded the wakeup call of Sinai about our lost spiritual state as guilty sinners estranged from our holy God? Each of us must do so for ourselves. Only when we understand this about our desperate condition are we then ready to listen to the mediator's "Fear not."

## II. The purpose of the mediator's "Fear not" (vv. 20-22a).

Illustration: Our military and those who hold federal office take an oath that commits them to their purpose. They promise to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, while obeying their superiors according to the Military Code of Justice. The oath ends with, "So help me, God."

Application: The God of the Bible has taken some oaths that define His covenants. The book of Hebrews explains to us that because He is God, He does not say, "so help me, God" as the end of His oaths: "For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely, blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee'" (Heb. 6:13-14).

That oath to bless Abraham and to multiply his seed is one that extended to Abraham's son Isaac, and then to Isaac's

son Jacob. So, it is no small detail that when God tells Moses to answer the Israelites, He says, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel." *Israel* was Jacob's new name, signifying God's covenant to bless him. Jacob had learned not to tremble or run from God (Gen. 32:24-32). He had learned the purpose behind the mediator's "Fear not," and the Lord desired the same for Israel's children (v. 32).

Moses explains God's purpose in His dealings with his people in verse 20: "for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not"; in Deut. 5:29, this same purpose is expressed this way: "O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!" God desires for Israel eternal life through a change of heart. That is Sinai's purpose.

God understands that the enemy of His people is their sin and disobedience, their prideful lack of fear and self-righteous unbelief. He purposes to save His people from their sins, to change their heart into a heart that fears Him and obeys Him that it may be well with them forever. This is reason He sends the mediator to say to them, "Fear not."

III. The God of the mediator's "Fear not" (vv. 22b-23).

Illustration: The philosopher Voltaire once famously said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." He said this in response to an anonymous essay that was titled, "The Three Imposters," which attacked the religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and advocated atheism. Voltaire's point was that good social order requires some concept of God.

Application: Sinai, of course, countenances no such Enlightenment foolishness. The message of Sinai about God's exist-

ence is quite different from Voltaire's. Sinai tells us, "Because God does exist, you must know Him as He is and never try to reinvent Him." The God of the mediator's "Fear not" reveals Himself with two important emphases:

1. He is the God of heaven. He exists independently of and above His earthly creatures. As His creatures, we are not tasked with making our own gods. Nor are we tasked with adjusting what God says about Himself to make Him more acceptable to ourselves. He is the God of heaven, and we are the people of earth. Whatever god is imagined or manufactured by mere earthlings is a false god.

2. He is the God who has spoken. He has revealed Himself to us. He talks to us and we can talk with Him. He is there, and He has not been silent. Agnosticism is as inexcusable as is atheism, because God has spoken from heaven.

When the Lord says "you have seen" in verse 22b, the grammar there is emphatic. We might translate the phrase, "Even you yourselves have seen." Think of all that the Israelites had seen up to this point, which demonstrated to them beyond a shadow of a doubt the reality and true nature of God's existence – the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, mana from heaven, the terrors of Sinai.

And then remember that we are equally without excuse for not knowing the God of heaven who has spoken, for we possess the inspired account from God Himself of all that this people had seen. Emphatically, it is we who possess a Bible. Peter, who experienced not Mount Sinai but the Mount of Transfiguration, called the scriptural evidence we possess the "more sure word" of revelation from heaven (2 Pet. 1:19-21). This is the God of the mediator's "Fear not." He is someone we must know by believing what He has said, not someone we can invent or imagine for ourselves.

#### IV. The altar of the mediator's "Fear not" (vv. 24-26).

Application: When God speaks from heaven, He talks about an altar. Ever since the days of his first sin, man has understood his need for an altar where a sacrifice for those sins could be made. The Lord killed animals, perhaps on an altar, so the nakedness of sinful Adam and Eve could be covered with their skins. Their son, Abel, brought the best of his flock to sacrifice to the Lord.

This generation of the Exodus had killed their Passover lambs, whose blood was shed in a cross-like formation on the homes of Israelites to save them from the death angel. Each home so protected became an altar of sacrifice.

And now trembling before Sinai, conscious of the weakness of their sinful flesh, the Lord tells His people to fear not, but to build an altar. The altar must not have man's handiwork on it, because that would defile it. It must not have man's nakedness on it, for man is a sinner from birth, and the sacrifice must be undefiled and holy. Clearly, all we need to worship the God of the Bible is the undefiled altar, and the holy sacrifice. All this, of course, points to the cross-work of the sinless and virgin-born Son of God.

John the Baptist identified Jesus Christ as the sacrifice we need. Pointing to Jesus he proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). And the cross where Jesus died is our altar: "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate" (Heb. 13:10-12).

Illustration: I mentioned to a loved one that Friday was the 33rd wedding anniversary for Maureen and I, and she mentioned that Jesus died when He was 33 years old. I replied, "Yes, He died for your sins and mine."

Application; It is one thing to believe that Jesus died when He was 33 years of age, but quite another to understand that He is the mediator who tells us "Fear not," because He died for my sins. Do you believe He did so for you?

Conclusion: When God speaks about the altar of earth and of stone, He begins speaking in the singular rather than the plural. All of the *yous* of vv. 24-26 are singular.

Evidently, at this juncture in Israel's history, and perhaps going forward as well, the sons of Israel were encouraged to erect their own personal altars in worship of Yahweh, the way their patriarch fathers had for generations before. Both Joshua and Gideon are examples of this (Josh. 8:30-31, Judg. 6:24-32).

The practice is eventually discouraged due to the temptation for idolatry in the land of Canaan, but here the need of the hour seems to be that each Israelite understands that he must have an altar wherever God makes His name known (everywhere they went in the days of the pillar of cloud/ fire). God's instruction here about the sinner's need for an altar is personal, one-on-one. He says to each one of us, "Fear not, you too can have an altar of atonement."

And so, this passage not only points to the cross; it also points each one of us personally and individually to the cross as "my" altar of sacrifice. Jesus died there for each one of us. The cross of Calvary is God's altar. Jesus is the Lamb sacrificed for our sins.

We must not try to find our own way, nor change God's way to better fit our ways. We must put down our human tools of salvation and recognize that our sinful nakedness has nothing to offer the altar that must save us (Acts 4:12).

Salvation is only through the holy Lamb symbolized by every sacrifice ever conducted by a son of Israel. Come to the cross of Calvary. Only there can a guilty sinner hear Jesus's prayer, "Father, forgive him, for he knows not what he does." Only there will you and I find the true Mediator's, "Fear not."

Moses's "Fear not" reminds us of the "Fear not" spoken on Christmas night. The angel told the shepherds, "Fear not. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Fear not. A Savior has been born for you. Repent of your sin and trust Him to save you. Then tremble no more.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*