

Standing at a Distance

10.3.2021

Exodus Series

Missions Convention

Message 29

Exodus 20:18–21 (CSB)

18 All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the ram's horn, and the mountain surrounded by smoke. When the people saw it they trembled and stood at a distance. 19 "You speak to us, and we will listen," they said to Moses, "but don't let God speak to us, or we will die."

20 Moses responded to the people, "Don't be afraid, for God has come to test you, so that you will fear him and will not sin." 21 And the people remained standing at a distance as Moses approached the total darkness where God was.

Introduction: A Holy Audience.

A. Israel has been in the audience of the Holy God.

1. The context of these 10 Commandments were fire, and smoke, and lightning.

a. This was not the still, small voice of God.

b. It was, indeed, an incredible demonstration of God's might.

2. They have been made completely and acutely aware of God's presence, power, and holiness.

3. Israel had stood at the foot of the Mountain while God had gave these commands.

B. The text leads us to believe that the people hadn't heard the actual words spoken to Moses and the leadership, but they knew that God had spoken.

1. Moses was the mediator, the middle-person.
2. He had been up close in the presence of God.
3. And was now bringing the Word to the people.

C. The response of God's people to this display of God's power was fear.

1. The reader should be a little surprised by this.
 - a. Israel had been guided by God's pillar of fire and cloud this whole time.
 - b. They had witnessed the plagues of God upon Egypt and left unscathed.
 - c. They have drunk water from rocks, dined on bread from heaven, and walked through seas on dry ground.
2. So why did the people respond in so much fear to the Presence of God?

1. First, they feared God's power.

A. We know about God's miracles.

1. Yet, experiencing a miracle is not the same as experiencing the full Power of God.
2. Miracles are expressions of God's power.
 - a. But do you really think that it took all of God's might and power to part the Red Sea?
 - b. Do we really believe it was hard for God to make water rush from the rock?
 - c. When we pray for healing in our lives, and God answers, do we really think that was the ultimate expression of God's power?
 1. I believe the greatest expression of God's power was raising Jesus from the dead.

2. And yet, was that hard for God?

d. Just because something is impossible for us, that does not make it impossible for God.

B. Even though Israel had seen God work before, this encounter was on a different level.

1. In this moment, they realized how Great God is and how powerless they were.

2. In this encounter, they were aware of God in a whole, new way.

C. Dare I say, believers today are too content with our experience and understanding of God.

1. We are content singing songs about victory, without experiencing victory ourselves.

2. We are content with sermons that speak of God's Omnipotence, but have no impact upon our lives.

3. We content ourselves with a God who heals our diseases and gives us our daily bread, yet we never stand in awe of Him.

4. We want the hand of God, but not the Face of God.

a. We want the miracles of God, without the awesomeness of God.

b. May we not be content standing at a distance, when God has called us to come to Him.

D. Israel was afraid of God's power, and thus stood at a distance.

1. Many of us are afraid of God's power, too.

2. We choose not to seek the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, because we are afraid of what could happen.

3. We are afraid to accept God's call upon our lives, because we are afraid of what God will ask to do through our lives.

4. We are afraid that God's power will interrupt and disrupt the normalcy of our lives.

a. So, we choose a relationship of distance instead of intimacy.

b. We prefer others to hear from God, and to tell us what God had said.

2. Second, The people feared their sinfulness.

A. Many men and women have had encounters with God.

1. And many of the encounters shared a common theme:

2. At the moment God showed up, the person became aware of how sinful they were and how holy God is.

a. Isaiah became aware of his unclean lips and speech.

b. John the Revelator fell down as though dead.

c. Daniel had to be picked up and set right.

3. Israel responded by demanding a mediator and distance.

B. The Presence of God always reminds us of our sinfulness.

1. Philip Ryken wrote: The people had come into the very presence of the great and terrible judge of all sin. They were guilty sinners before a holy God, and they could sense that this was a life-threatening encounter.¹

2. Sin cannot stay in God's presence.

a. Have you ever sinned, and you knew what you did was wrong, and thus had trouble praying or worshipping after?

1. Those are moments of conviction.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, [*Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 679.

2. Moments when you are aware of your sinfulness and God's holiness.

3. In those moments, you can choose to harden your hearts and walk away or repent and be forgiven.

b. At the foot of the Mountain, Israel became very aware of Her sinfulness.

1. Up until this point, it has been Egypt's sin that has been in view.

2. Now, the spotlight of Law and Spirit, focuses no longer on Egypt's sin but on Israel's.

c. Even through the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, about 50 days, Israel was being unfaithful to God by worshipping false-idols.

3. The Fire, smoke, thunder, and lightening were signs of God's judgment.

a. The Book of Revelation mentions thunder and lightning in connection with God sending judgment upon sinful humanity (Rev. 4:5, 6:1, 8:5, 11:19).

b. Without question, the people were aware of God's awesome power and His holiness.

c. This resulted in Israel desiring distance between themselves and God.

That leads us to the 3rd element: God's power and holiness led to a desire for distance.

3. Third, The people were aware of the distance.

A. Recently, I've been singing a song that says:

1. How great the Chasm, that lay between us.

2. How high the mountain, I could not climb.

- a. This song speaks of the distance between humanity and God.
- b. It is a reminder that it was not us who sought God, but God who sought us.

B. At the foot of the Mountain, The people of Israel understood that there was a distance between them and God that they could not cross.

1. They were not worthy of God's presence.
2. They were no match for the matchless power of God.
3. So they responded in two ways:
 - a. They cried out for Moses to be their mediator.
 - b. They stood at a distance.

C. What we see happen in the rest of Exodus, is that Moses goes up the Mountain.

1. Moses hears the voice of God.
2. Moses receives the tablets of stone.
3. Moses fellowships in God's presence.
4. Moses' face is the one that glows from the presence of God.
5. All of this while Israel stands at a distance.

D. The result of this distance was Israel's sin with the Golden Calf.

1. God wanted Israel to approach the Mountain and hear the Law.
2. Israel didn't think they could handle that, so they asked for Moses to do this instead.
3. While Moses was away, the people of Israel began to play.

a. Well-intentioned distances often lead to well-intentioned sin.

b. The same thing happened with David and Bathsheba (at the time when kings go off to war, David stayed home).

c. It's hard to fall into sin if you don't get close to the edge.

4. When we choose to keep distance with God, we leave space for the enemy to work and operate.

a. It is within the margins that the enemy of our soul does the most damaging work.

b. When we create distance where distance is not appropriate, we open ourselves to problems.

Here's the Good News:

4. Jesus bridges the distance.

A. Israel's cry for a mediator foreshadows the ministry of Jesus.

1. For you and I, we have a perfect and sinless mediator.

2. Jesus mediates a better covenant than what Moses received.

3. Jesus intercedes for us on our behalf.

4. Jesus bridges the gap between Holy Father sinful people.

B. Without Jesus, we are still at a distance from God.

1. The distance between our sinfulness and God's holiness cannot be covered by our religion.

2. The distance between our weakness and God's power cannot be overcome merely by human exertion.

3. What we needed was a perfect, sinless, mediator who would bridge the gap.

C. Because of Jesus, we may now come boldly before the throne of Grace.

1. Because of Jesus, we no longer stand before God in our righteousness but in the righteousness of Jesus.

2. We are not like Israel, who must stand at a distance from God lest we die, but instead we are called to Draw Near to God and He will draw near to us.

However, there are people who are still standing at a distance.

Application: Even today there are people who are still standing at a distance.

A. One group of people who are standing at a distance are those who refuse to go deeper.

1. Israel cried out "Don't let God speak..."
 - a. They willingly wanted to stand at a distance.
 - b. Even though God had set up boundaries around the mountain to keep them safe, the Israelites didn't want to get that close.
2. The Israelites didn't want to get closer, but Moses did.
 - a. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asks God to show him His glory.
 - b. "what Israel dreaded was what Moses coveted-(wanted) most (Exod. 33:18)".²
3. All of us are in different stages of our journey with God.
 - a. This isn't a bad thing, a wrong thing, or even a problem.
 - b. What is a problem is when we become wholly and completely satisfied with where we have settled.
 - c. **Israel feared God and wanted distance; Moses feared God and wanted to draw closer.**
4. May I ask, "What is keeping you from intentionally drawing closer to Jesus?"

² R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 170.

a. Is it a spouse or kids? If so, pray for them and about them. (This is particularly hard if your spouse is an unbeliever).

b. When we blame our jobs or careers for our lack of desire, we are giving more power and importance to them than they really have.

c. **Maybe you remain at a distance because you don't know what intimacy looks like.**

1. If you do not know what drawing closer looks like, find a godly mentor who will walk with you into the deeper waters.

2. Read the Bible and other God-focused books. Listen or watch sermons online.

d. In this day, and this time, the only reason you and I are not growing in our love and passion for Jesus is because we don't want to.

5. I remind us, that there is danger in distance.

B. Another group of people who remain at a distance are those who have never heard the Gospel.

1. I shudder to think that there are people who still have never heard the name of Jesus even one time.

a. For these people, there is a distance between themselves and God.

b. This distance can only be covered through faith in Jesus Christ.

1. Though we may fill the distance full of drugs, entertainment, worldly pursuits, and false religions, these pursuits will always leave us unsatisfied and unsaved.

2. Only Jesus can bridge the distance between sinner and Savior.

2. Churches, missionaries, and ministries are called to both groups of people.

- a. We are called to people who are at a distance from God.
- b. We have a calling and commission to tell people that they don't have to die for their own sins.
- c. When you partner with local churches and missionaries, you are helping people draw near to God.

3. As we approach Jesus' imminent return, we need to rediscover the urgency of Evangelism and Proclamation.

- a. We all have a part to fulfill in the Great Commission.
- b. Some of us go, some of us give, and all of us pray.

Close: In just a few moments, I'm going to ask all of us to renew our commitment to giving to those who are called to go.

A. But first, I want to focus on those of us in this room who are holding back from God.

1. You are still testing out the waters of Christianity.

- a. You know there is more.
- b. You know you are called to more and called to go deeper.
- c. But you find comfort in the distance.

2. Before I can ask for your money, I'm asking for your heart.

- a. I want us to take a few moments, and pray to go deeper.
- b. If your prayer today is "Lord, I want more of you!", would you join me up front as we commit ourselves to God once again.

B. FAITH PROMISE: I hope you have received a Faith Promise card.

1. This is simply a tool helps the Church better plan for giving to missionaries throughout the year.
2. We won't Dunn you or follow up with you throughout the year.
 - a. But it does help me know what this church is believing God to help provide this year in missions.
 - b. This is a financial expression of our belief that God is going to use us and our missionary brothers and sisters to close the gap among people who are still at a distance.
3. So as families, as individuals, as companies, would you be so bold that, after I pray, would you mark what you are believing God will give through you this year, and then raise that card up high so we count and celebrate!