

Small Group Discussion Guide

Exodus 20:18-21

“A Draw-Near Fear”

Based on Sunday's
Sermon 10/11/26

Background

“This next portion of Scripture describes Israel’s reaction to the scene at Mount Sinai. God has appeared to them in cloud and fire on top of the mount, and he has delivered the basis of the covenant law to them. Now, how will they respond to it? Earlier they had proclaimed, ‘All that Yahweh has spoken we will do!’ (19:8). Is that still the case?

The people responded to the theophany and giving of the law at Sinai in three ways.

First, they were **‘afraid’**. In some translations (e.g. the NASB), the clause is rendered, ‘the people saw’. Those two verbs in Hebrew, ‘to fear’ and ‘to see’, are often confused—that is, they look and sound alike. Many early versions, however (such as the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch, and others) read ‘were afraid’. This reading makes sense because ‘to see’ has already been used earlier in the verse (**‘all the people perceived’**).

Secondly, there was a physical response on the part of the Hebrews. They **‘trembled’**. The Hebrew verb (*nûa* ‘) generally means ‘to totter / reel / stagger’. The appearance of the Almighty and the words that he spoke actually shook the people to the very core and fabric of their physical being.

Finally, they apparently fled from the mountain. When the commandments were delivered the people were standing ‘at the bottom of the mountain’ (19:17). Now they are standing **‘at a distance’**. The Hebrew for ‘at a distance’ usually means ‘far away’ (see 1 Sam. 26:13; Isa. 22:3; 23:7). Why did they run away? Fear of God, fear of the law and fear of judgement were just too much for them to bear. In other words, they realized their guilt and unholiness before the awesome God, and they knew they were deserving of his condemnation.”¹

Discussion Questions

Getting Started

1. When have you experienced something so powerful or overwhelming that it made you step back in awe?

Observation

2. How does the physical setting (mountain, darkness, smoke) shape the scene?

¹ John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 19–40*, vol. 2, EP Study Commentary (Darlington, England; Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 52–53.

3. How do the people respond to Moses after experiencing these signs?
4. What does Moses tell the people about God's purpose in revealing Himself this way?
5. Where does Moses go at the end of the passage, and where do the people remain?

Interpretation

6. Why do you think the people are afraid of hearing God directly, even after receiving His commandments?
7. How does this passage reveal the difference between Moses' relationship with God and the people's relationship with God?
8. Read Hebrews 12:18-24. Compare the Mount Sinai scene in Exodus with Mount Zion scene in Hebrews. What role does each mountain scene play in leading us to Jesus Christ?

Application

9. Where do you see a healthy fear of God in your life—and where might it be lacking?
10. How can we draw near to such a holy God, and why is it so crucial that we do?

Prayer List: