

Sinai and Its Terrors

Hebrews 12: 18-21

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From the triumph at the Red Sea was a succession of divine dealings in nothing but grace to Israel, the Gentile at the end, bringing to Moses his wife and sons, and, after offerings and sacrifice, eating bread with Moses and Aaron and all the elders before God.

The words just read which describe its distinctive character with all vividness, were addressed to confessors of Christ. They had been Jews, and still were exceedingly attached to what they called, and what might reasonably seem to be, the covenant. All know that ancestral religion with any show of coming from God, must have no small fascination for the natural heart. Men assume that what God Himself introduced with the utmost solemnity must be the right thing for man to receive and retain at all cost. But this scripture is expressly far otherwise. God was here giving the plainest warning that although His sovereign grace had brought His people out of Egypt, and they had promised to keep His covenant as the condition of being His peculiar people, it could issue in nothing but failure and ruin. None could live by the commandment holy and just and good, because they were all sinners.

How could sinful man be saved by the law? It was not given to save sinners. It was meant to convince such as seriously tried to obey it, that none could stand on that ground before God. Life is of His grace to the believer. We are saved by grace through faith. He that breaks the law must surely die. Hence no matter what helps may later accompany the law, it is said in 2 Cor. 3 to be the ministry of death and of condemnation. Its real aim is to overwhelm the guilty, that they might turn from self and law to the Saviour.

Accordingly when man fell in Eden, the divine resource was made known. The bruised Seed of the woman was to crush Satan's power. It was Christ, not only before the law, but long even before the promises to the fathers. It was the due time to reveal it when the first pair sinned and became outcasts from paradise.

Long after, Israel undertook to obey Jehovah's voice, and keep His covenant. "All that Jehovah hath spoken we will do" (Ex. 19: 8). They trusted themselves ; they forgot all the solemn witness of the past; they pleaded not the promises to their fathers, still less the everlasting gospel for a lost paradise. On the contrary they made promises to God which sinful man never keeps, and only pretends to in an outward form and with lip homage. There is no reality in it. A groundless hope may buoy up, along with a fearful looking for of judgment. It is terror that rests on men's consciences, and terror is not the way to God or His salvation.

That is what the Epistle to the Hebrews here portrays. The reference is to Ex. 19, 20, the unmistakable evidence of what all Israel then felt, nay, of what Moses could not but share, and was inspired to state for all time to all that heed the word of God. Such was the inevitable character of God's law-giving at Sinai. It is in vain for men to forget the facts and to imagine a fond dream for religious pride out of what was spoken, seen, and heard at Sinai. God displayed His awful majesty there and then to Israel in a way that was never known in this world before or since. Therefore the Jews boasted of such a beginning of their religion as unparalleled. Only their fathers stood round that Mount of God: but were they not there in abject fear and excessive trembling? Where was there shown the least real knowledge of God? where any true sense of their own state in His sight? What a contrast with him who said, "I have heard of thee by the bearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth

thee. Wherefore I abhor myself in dust and ashes" (Job 42: 5, 6). How little they owned that they were guilty sinners, and that there could be no approach to God until their sins were judged and blotted out from them!

What the scene at Sinai presented was the certainty of God's judgment of sin; of this the passage I have read is a simple, clear, and solemn declaration. Least of all ought Israel to forget that Jehovah is God armed against sin, a jealous God that visits the fathers' iniquity on the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate Him, and shows mercy to thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments. But how could the sinner appear before God arrayed with such terrors? How was he to get rid of his sins to stand before Him? Not a word to this effect appeared in the ten words God spoke that day. It was but little indeed that He did then say, but every word was beyond doubt tremendous and fatal to the guilty. It was meant to fill the heart of man with terror because of his sins. But it is the goodness of God that leads to repentance; it is faith in our Lord Jesus that gives assurance of salvation.

But alas! it is the sad fact and incurable malady of man's heart as he is naturally, that he thinks, feels, and does everything wrong. The gospel he scorns because it is sovereign and divine righteousness. The law he perverts to make out his own righteousness, though it only pronounces death and condemnation on him. His conscience trembles every now and then before the law of God; but he renews his sins ere long. For if there be nothing more but such a dread of God, after the lightnings and thunders pass man returns to his vomit or to wallowing in the mire; so it is that he perishes.

Hence, even in the early days, when the gospel of grace was first sent out by God, there was a constant tendency among both Jews and Gentiles that confessed Christ, to hanker after the law in one shape or another. So the apostle had to seek the recovery of the Galatian saints, and here was led by the Spirit to set forth to the Jews that professed Christ the true character of the law, and its entire difference from the gospel. It was not merely the unconverted who were in danger but those who had begun well. There is the same peril now.

How often where a man is entirely unexercised about his sins, he is occupied with the sins of others! Thank God, I am not "a swearer," nor "a drunkard," nor "a whore-monger," nor "an usurer." And because he can acquit himself of the more glaring transgressions of the law, whereof he sees others guilty, he flatters himself that he is in a position by no means bad. If he be also rigid about the Sabbath, paying his debts to the Levite! remembering what is due to the priest, and making an offering to the Temple of God, is he not a good and religious man? There are not a few like this now. The Lord puts that very case into the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and prayed with himself. Here was one thanking God that He was not as other men, extortioners, unclean, unjust, or even as "this taxgatherer." Therefore he believed he was righteous and despised others. But the Tax-gatherer, standing afar off would not lift so much as his eyes to heaven, but smote on his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, not merely a sinner, as one of the crowd, but the sinner, who has not a word to say for himself.

How fatal to turn the law, which God gave to prove how man fails, into a means of pretending to righteousness before Him! How blessed to own the truth as to ourselves, and yet to rest upon the mercy that provides a Saviour!

Then again, there is another danger. In returning to the law since Christ came and died and rose, it is to abandon the great reality of grace and truth to take up a mere shadow. At that time when the apostle wrote, confessing Jews still brought their sacrifices and offerings and such like ordinances of

the law. God had forbore since Pentecost, but He would have these shadows to cease before He swept away temple, city and people from the land, which was really but Aceldama, Blood-field. And the apostle lets them know here that when God pronounced the law at Sinai He showed its death-bringing character. The lesson really inculcated at Sinai was that as a man in the flesh, that is in my natural state, there is nothing for me from the law but wrath. It is quite certain that I cannot live before God save in Him to whom God pointed as Saviour from the beginning. "It was for Him that all believers waited. They counted, not on themselves but on the Christ. Yet they accordingly offered sacrifices as a witness and they walked before God, as they worshipped Him, before that Moses was raised up to introduce the Levitical system with all its multiplicity of types and shadows. These were things that they honoured as provisional and preparatory to the One whom they awaited.

But God also looked onward to His own Son becoming flesh, and replacing that system by His work on the cross. It was He who was to be incarnate that appeared to tell of grace in the judgment of Satan before Adam's expulsion from the garden of Eden. Directly man transgressed against God, He came there, and spoke to them of another that should take up the cause of man; of another that should be bruised, but should also and completely bruise the old serpent, the devil.

The Deliverer of man, the Seed of the woman, was to be therefore a person far above man, however truly He might become man through the woman, to do His work righteously and suitably to God's glory.

A believing man is rightly called to resist the devil when he tempts 1 but how can any man apart from Christ bruise the devil under his feet? Only a divine person could really effect that. Hence one is sure that He Who was spoken of when Adam and Eve fell in the garden was none other than the divine person Who deigned to come of woman, and will bruise Satan shortly under our feet.

Very touching it is to know that none other was He who was first Himself to be bruised. Whether He appeared as angel of Jehovah to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, it was He that we own now as the Son of God before all that He wrought and suffered in the fulness of time. He became man because in Him alone were the elements of His person united that could adequately meet the exigencies of both God and man. He must be able adequately and perfectly to present man to God, as well as God to man.

Further, He must be man to sympathise with man, no less than to die for him. He must be absolutely without sin if He were to become a sacrifice for sin. He must be the propitiation or atonement for our sins if we are to be righteously forgiven. None of this could come to pass, save in the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

At Sinai not a ray of kindly light shone, not a token of grace for sinners was given, not a word to encourage approach to God: nothing but the most awe-inspiring menace of death, save for such as love Him and keep His commandments. How inexcusable that any should be so blind about himself and his sins as to take his stand on law before God! It was Cain-like insensibility. Let me help to make the truth plainer by referring you to the scene itself of which the apostle treats.

"The people stood afar off; and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness, where God was." How different from God being in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and committing to us the word of reconciliation! So John 1: 17 contrasts the two: "the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." At Sinai was heard the law; and by the law is the knowledge of sin. The saving grace of God is what teaches us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godlily in this present world, looking for the blessed hope, and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The law is not

of faith, and can only kill and condemn the sinner.

The law is associated with that which could be touched, and that burned with fire, and with blackness and gloom, and tempest. Every instrument of divine service was visible and tangible. It essentially met the eye of man. The unconverted man could see and touch its objects, just as much as the believer. There was nothing there that was characteristic of faith. The Christian, on the contrary, walks by faith. We have to do with what is not seen and cannot be touched. Take the cross of Christ. Although there was evident enough the worst effect of man's evil in His pain and shame, the infinite work that was wrought thereon was between Him and God. This was hidden entirely from the eyes and ken of man. It was not the outside of the cross which any one could see that saved believers. It was the council of peace between both. Indeed we may notice that there was a time for Christ upon the cross when all was shrouded in supernatural darkness the very time when our sins were laid upon the head of Jesus. Who saw this within? None but God. Sin is rebellion against Him, and atonement is entirely between God and Jesus His Son. It was for His glory, as well as for sinners that they by faith might be saved. For no other reason was it possible for God to bruise His own righteous Servant and Son. Why else should He forsake Him in whom His soul delighted? One word explains it: grace on His part; on man's-sin, that even in this the Son of Man should be glorified; and God in Him. It was sin that brought Him down from heaven; it was sin that led Him to the cross on earth. Then and there was our guilt by Jehovah laid upon the Lord Jesus, when He in love, and obedience, became a sacrifice for sin, even for our sins (Isa. 53).

This was all purposely kept from the eye of man; as it most fittingly was made matter of faith in God.

While the work so fully predicted in both O. and N.T., was being enacted, who on earth entered into its wondrous import and bearing? Not a single disciple, not one even of the twelve apostles whom He had so often apprised that so it was to be.

Whether we consider God's doing in love, or man's misdoing in I hatred, we can apprehend in our measure that there should be that darkness of a supernatural kind. Throughout the land of Egypt darkness had been inflicted as a plague by Jehovah, while Israel had light in their dwellings. For three days it lasted, so that they saw not one another nor did any one rise from his place. At the cross of Christ it told a tale to the ear of faith still more profound. It was not an infliction upon wicked men. This darkness surrounded the Holy One of God made sin, and God forsaking, Him because of sin, our sins laid on Him.

He undertook that burden which none other could bear, yet more intolerable to Him than to any other; and God must judge the sin-bearer as sin deserves in His sight. And the certainty that so it was, that it was borne fully and as fully accepted by God is the ground of perfect peace with God.

Man had wrought ill guiltily, incessantly, audaciously for many hundreds of years, and the deplorable result now seen, especially in Israel, who became worse and worse until God destroyed them nationally and dispersed them over all the world. Since then they have never been able to establish themselves in their own country. Such is their state now, "abiding many days without a king and without a prince, and without a sacrifice."

Christianity is altogether different. There the Lord is saving sinners, and gathering saints to His name. He alone bore the burden of sin; and He alone is the Head of the body. But not one word in the verse read treats of either; because Sinai is the theme, and not Christ's work of atonement or of gathering God's children in one. The darkness at Sinai was in view of His law and its war with transgression. At the cross it surrounded Jesus made sin, that sinners who believe might be brought to

God without a trace of sin, washed in His blood. The law was so spoken as to strike terror into every heart. At the cross, Christ was doing the deepest, greatest and most loving work He ever did; to man utterly strange, the most wonderful even for God, the most profound for saints. Nothing more abhorrent to God than our sins; yet He that hated them absolutely laid them upon the head of His own Son that He might bear them away for His enemies, henceforth His family.

Christ must bear the burden, which, if He bore it not away righteously, must sink us everlastingly in hell. The perfect sacrifice on our behalf to God, He completely clears every one that believes in Him, from the judgment of God.

It is positively declared by our Lord (John 5: 24), that he who believes has life eternal and does not come into judgment but is passed out of death into life. Such is the virtue of life in Him, as the apostle John witnesses; such the efficacy of His death, according to the apostle Paul. Christ bore the judgment at God's hand, that we who believe might be set free.

Nothing can be clearer than the astonishing work of divine grace in salvation. Christ bore that judgment alone, even those most concerned being wholly ignorant of such wondrous grace, the foundation of God's righteousness till He revealed it in the gospel. None could intermeddle. No stranger could intermeddle with our joy; still less could any stranger intermeddle with the judgment of God and our sins. Hence it is that the gospel goes forth fully and freely to the greatest sinner upon the earth.

It was altogether different at Sinai. There they stood afar off at the foot of the mountain all aglow with fire, the very mediator, Moses, quaking with terror.

But when the Holy Spirit led them to apprehend the cross of Christ what a contrast! Where sin was atoned for the victim was consumed by fire. In such sacrifices, the blood was brought in and the body burnt without the camp. The one part attested His absolute fitness for God's presence and efficacy there; the rest attested His identification with our sins and was burnt by fire outside. Christ, perfectly holy, identified Himself with all our evil.

To bear our evil He came, and evil cannot be got rid of except by divine judgment, which the fire represented.

But here, the mountain, Sinai, on fire was to warn men of what must be their portion who, neglecting Christ, betake themselves to law and fail under it as they must.

Yes, blackness, gloom, tempest, preternatural trumpet, and God's voice, more terrible than all the fitting accessories of the law, threatening wrath and death to those that trust themselves instead of Jesus the Christ.

"The law worketh wrath," instead of saving from it as Christ does.

And the trumpet's sound was no earthly trumpet, its blast sounding louder and louder only added to the abject terror of their hearts.

Did God's voice at Sinai relieve the Israelite? Calm, distinct, unmistakeable, it pronounced what must be the knell of death for each guilty of slighting or dishonouring Him : for him who went after other gods or broke any commandments of Jehovah, this voice was more terrible than all the other signs and sights of that tremendous day.

Not one word of His glad tidings was then breathed with the law. This is the work, not of God: but of Christendom all over which mixes up the law and the gospel. I should be thankful to hear of a

single denomination where it is not habitually practised. Nor is this mixture in the large buildings only, in the little ones too. But whether in little or in great, the issue is that man is mixed up with the divine work of the cross; and what Christ has finished is supplemented and smothered under works of law.

Here the law is wholly distinct from the gospel. At Sinai it was unrelieved terror, and God purposely did it that they might cry out for Messiah, the Saviour. They never thought of Christ. They cried out in fact for Moses as the mediator between them and God. But His mind was to give a far better mediator; but it was kept quite distinct from the law, its fears and its distance.

Therefore they entreated that they might never hear that voice again. What! never hear the voice of God! Yes, when He made known the law God's voice was far more awful than the unearthly trumpet, or the gloom or the thunder and lightning at mount Sinai.

Such was the ushering in of the Jews' religion. It was wholly devoid of mercy for the sinful; it threatened death on failure. It presented nothing of Christ; and only filled them with alarm and despair. God could use it to crush self-righteousness and thus negatively drive to grace in His Son. The background and surroundings of Sinai had for their object to set aside all hope of life from the law. Righteousness in that way is a perfect impossibility for mortal man.

The law can only prove death to the sinner. For "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law." It is Christ who is life, and gives life to the believer.

The law can but kill fallen man. Yea, here we are told of the proclamation at Sinai: if so much as a beast touch the mountain it shall be stoned or thrust through with a dart. Yet, a beast having neither guilt nor conscience, is incapable of moral responsibility to God. Hence if a beast devours another beast none thinks of murder in the case. But God would mark at Sinai that the law overflowed with the threat of death all round, and that sinful man under it stood in the worst case of all: for who can deny that he is most guilty, and not a beast? Fallen man has a conscience which habitually bears witness against him and his sins.

Accordingly, at Sinai, God left no sort of doubt that there was no comfort, nor even hope, for man under the law. "As many as are of works of law are under curse" (Gal. 3: 10). Such is the character and issue of the law of which the Jews boasted. Yet have confessors of Christ sought to mix it up with the gospel. And how very many all over Christendom to-day have been crying: "Have mercy on us and incline our hearts to keep this law."

Used to this cry once, I have not, thank God, heard it for sixty years. Still it rises up continually, where the gospel is professed. But such a mixture is a grievous mistake. It is to perpetuate what this scripture before us and many more were meant to avert. The law, says the apostle, is good if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man [which is not a lawful use of it] but for the lawless and disobedient. If you put yourself under the law, it can and must condemn and kill you; not because it is bad but because you are. The law is necessarily a killing power to the transgressor. The crucified Christ is the only Saviour of the lost. The law as such executes its office to the bitter end; but when it brings the sinner to the sense that he is a dead man before God, grace shows him how Christ suffered for sins that he might believe and be saved.

This mixing up of the law with the gospel is as pernicious as it is unscriptural. "For ye are not come" to Sinai, but to Zion, even had we been Jews. "By grace ye are saved through faith." It is on a wholly opposed principle. No doubt there is another way of ruin; not by going back to rites and ordinances, but by giving up to sin and licentiousness. Compare Heb. 6: 4-8, and Heb. 10: 26-30.

The aim here was to point how, when law was given, God indicated the folly of expecting salvation through it. So terrible was the sight that even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake." Who can say that this is the effect of the gospel? Does God's glad tidings produce dread, or take it away from the believer?

It gives life, pardon and peace. It assures of Christ's love and of God's love, which is more than even glory. The glory manifested will be the proof of the love that gave it; but love is the source of that gift and of a vast deal more.

Look at the Saviour and the sinful woman who came into the house of Simon the Pharisee. Weigh if you can, the love shown and vindicated in that uncongenial abode. Her sins were many, but she believed and loved; for love so gratuitous and divine drew out her love. And the Lord manifested it, delighted to make it known, not to the unbelieving Simon only, but to all present, and especially to her. He was not in the least degree ashamed of grace to the sinner. He knew, laid bare and refuted all that was passing in the Pharisee's heart; but He manifested God's love in His own. That love is shed abroad in the heart now; and so it will be in the presence of the Father and the Son.

May the Lord, therefore be pleased to deliver from all misuse of His word. For we have to do with the grace and truth which came through Jesus Christ. It is neither grace alone, nor yet truth alone; for either way would be the utmost danger. Grace alone tends to laxity and even licence; truth alone to a hardness and rigour, offensive to God and unbecoming to man. Grace and truth in all their fulness we know in our Lord Jesus; and thus alone were we won and blessed. Thus too we live, walk, serve and worship. Can there be a stronger contrast with the scene of Sinai?

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