



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Our Hope before a Holy God

Reverend Scott Johnson | February 1, 2026 | Exodus 20:18-26

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 20, verses 18 to 26. And this is the inerrant and infallible word of God. Now, when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountains smoking, the people were afraid and trembled. And they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not fear for God has come to test you that the fear of him may be before you that you may not sin." The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. And the Lord said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel, 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'"

New Testament Reading

Our New Testament reading is Hebrews chapter 12, Hebrews 12 verses 18 through 24. Hebrews 12, 18 through 24. For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and

darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given. If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels and festal gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God, the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

What it Means to Fear the Lord

I'll begin this morning by asking you a question. Do you fear God or do you walk in the fear of God? As Christians today, we don't usually speak of our faith in this way. We talk about knowing God or loving God, worshiping God, but not so often about fearing God. In fact, to fear the Lord, that phrase may even sound a little old-fashioned to us, kind of like the way they talked at your grandparents' fundamentalist Baptist church. We prefer to talk about the joy and peace of knowing God, being in communion with Him, but not so much about fearing God or fearing the Lord.

But the scriptures often speak in this way. In Psalm 130 verse four, we read, "But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared." First Peter 2, 17: "Honor everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the emperor." And in the Bible, almost in every situation, when God reveals himself to someone or some people in a way that is very extraordinary, very personal, that person or those people always come away from their encounter with God with an overwhelming sense of fear and dread. In the scriptures, when someone meets God, it is always a fearful thing.

For example, in the book of Judges, when the angel of the Lord appears to Manoah and his wife, those would become the parents of Samson. After the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah, he said, "We shall surely die for we have seen God." And you know the response of Isaiah the prophet when he was in the temple and the Lord appeared to Isaiah in the fullness of his glory and majesty. The Lord said, "Woe is me for I am lost for I'm a man of unclean lips. And

I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

And this is not just an Old Testament phenomenon. We see the same thing in the New Testament. You remember when Peter was fishing and Jesus was with him, Jesus caused Peter's net to miraculously fill with fish, and this filled the heart of Peter with fear. He said to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." And why did all these people come away from their encounter with the Lord filled with a sense of dread or fear? It was because of the holiness of God. When God reveals himself in the majesty of his splendor, his divine purity and holiness, it inspires, it has to inspire us with fear. It fills our hearts with the sense of dread.

Maybe the reason we don't speak of fearing God so much is because we've lost that sense of awe and dread before a God who is holy, a God who, according to the scripture, alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. Well, the Israelites certainly did not lack this sense of awe and dread before the Lord, especially when they met with the Lord at Mount Sinai.

Two Lessons from Mount Sinai

In our passage this morning, Moses tells us what happened right after the Lord spoke to the people of Israel and gave them the 10 commandments. And the picture that Moses draws for us here is a scene that is one of, you could almost call it abject terror, paralyzing fear of the people of Israel who have just heard and come into the presence of their Lord, a majestic and holy God. And as the hearts and the minds of the people of Israel were filled with this fear of the Lord, the Lord, through Moses, he taught the Israelites two lessons that would have made a deep impression upon the people, particularly at this time when they were so overcome by this sense of awe and dread in the presence of God.

Those two lessons were this. First of all, they needed a mediator to come into the presence of God. Secondly, they needed sacrifices to come into the presence of God. And we'll consider those two lessons this morning and what they mean for us as Christians today.

The Need for a Mediator

First of all, the Israelites were taught that they needed a mediator. The people of Israel, they just heard from the Lord. They were just in the presence of God as he descended upon Mount Sinai and those terrible scenes of fire and smoke and thunder and lightning and all of that. He declared to them the 10 commandments. And the reaction on the people of Israel was not something like, "That all sounds good, thank you for these rules, we'll try to keep them in mind." But Moses tells us that the people were left petrified. They were fearful.

Let me read verse 18. "Now, when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off." Imagine, if you will, being there among the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. With each peal of thunder, the earth beneath your feet rocks. Bullets of lightning light up the dark sky for an instant, and then the darkness again envelops you. You hear the ear-piercing blast of a trumpet. The mountain above you, so imposing, it's enveloped in fire and smoke, and above all else, worst of all, you hear the dreadful voice of the Lord thunders down from the mountain. This was definitely not the still small voice that the prophet Elijah heard.

And we too, if we had been there with the people of Israel, we would have responded in the very same way. We too would have been filled with a sense of dread and awe of being in the presence of God. We too would have been overcome by the fearful majesty, the holiness of God as he made himself known to the people. And when you couple that with all the words that the Israelites had just heard, the words that had thundered from the top of the mountain, these 10 commandments, they would have been filled as well with the dread of the judgment of God, that breaking those commandments would surely bring upon them.

It was out of that fear of God that the Israelites said to Moses in verse 19, "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die." Oh, the voice of the Lord was too terrible for them to hear. It was too frightful. It was so majestic, so glorious. We sometimes think, "Oh, if God would only speak to me." I'm not so sure we want that when we consider how it affected the Israelite people. And so the people wanted Moses to be a mediator. They wanted Moses to represent them, to go before them to the Lord and to the presence of God, to hear the voice of the Lord, to relay to them the words that God had spoken to Moses. They themselves did not want to go anywhere near the Lord. They were too afraid.

So verse 21 says, "The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was." Now, if the Israelites had not already understood it, at this time, they knew this lesson

was blazing upon their hearts. They needed someone to go before them into the presence of God. They needed a mediator. And they looked to Moses, the same Moses whom they had rejected in the wilderness, whose leadership they tried to throw off. Now they are begging him, "Moses, go, please, in our place to be with God. You go, you hear the voice of God. We cannot bear to hear it anymore." And so they learned that they needed a mediator.

The Requirement of Sacrifice

And God also used the occasion to teach the Israelites that they needed to approach him with sacrifices. And so when the Lord, or when Moses went up to speak with the Lord or to hear the Lord on Mount Sinai, God gave him instructions concerning how he was to be worshiped with sacrifices. And this was not an entirely new lesson for Moses and the Israelites. They already knew that God needed to be approached and worshiped through animal sacrifices. They knew that the blood of those animal sacrifices in some way atoned for their sins so that they could come into the presence of God.

But what was new here were the instructions concerning the altar upon which those sacrifices were to be offered. Before the Israelites would go on in the book of Exodus, which we'll see, to build a tabernacle at which they would offer sacrifices to the Lord—before that, they were to offer sacrifices on a very simple, a very primitive altar. The Lord says to Moses in verse 24, "An altar of earth you shall make for me." And according to verse 25, if the Israelites did use stones to construct an altar, they were not to be hewn, they were not to be touched by human tools, but they were to be just as they were found. They were not to be cut in any way.

And so this plain and unadorned altar—this was meant to reinforce in the minds of the Israelites the truth of God's holiness. In verse 25, the Lord says that if they did use tools to cut the stones for the altar, they would be profaning the altar. They would be desecrating the altar of the Lord. And the idea is that the more that this altar was a product of man's handiwork and design, sinful man's handiwork and design, the more that the altar was manmade in that sense, the more it would detract from the purity, the righteousness, the holiness of God.

It was for that same reason that the Lord prohibited in verse 26 that the priest or the worshiper, that he was not to go up by steps to the altar because he would expose himself on the altar and so profane it. And so the two lessons that the Lord impressed upon the hearts of the Israelites just after giving them the 10 commandments were these: that they needed a mediator, one who

could go between them and the Lord, and they needed to approach the Lord with right sacrifices, sacrifices offered on an altar that was kept sacred and pure.

Approaching a Holy God

Now, the Lord in all of this, He is being gracious. He is being merciful to the people of Israel. Remember the Lord graciously entered into this covenant with his people. He saw their misery. He saw their enslavement in Egypt. He heard their cries for deliverance. He brought them out of Egypt. He rescued them from their bondage to Pharaoh and to the slavery there. And so he showed them his love, but at the same time, He was still God. He is still God. Almighty, majestic, glorious, holy. And if the Israelites were learning anything, it was that they could not come to the Lord on their own terms in any way that they thought appropriate.

All of this, including the law, would have reminded the Israelites that they were sinners. They needed a mediator and they needed to come to God with sacrifices. And the same is true for you and me. Yes, God is a God of love. He is merciful. He is kind. He is compassionate. He is good. And yet we cannot come to him. We cannot come into his presence on our own terms in any way that we devise or think of. And the reason why we cannot do that is for the same reason the Israelites could not come to the Lord on their own terms. It's because we are sinners. God is holy.

If we were to come into the presence of a holy God without a mediator and without a sacrifice to atone for our sins, we would be destroyed in an instant by the infinite purity, the majestic holiness of God. We could not stand in his presence for a second. This is a fundamental truth that the scriptures reveal to us about God. But this is a truth that has by and large been lost on us in this unbelieving secular age in which we live.

We have forgotten, we have lost the sense of God's greatness, his glory. His perfect holiness, His uncompromising righteousness, His infinite weightiness. And at the same time, and this goes hand in hand, we have lost the sense of our own unrighteousness, our unworthiness, that we cannot just waltz into the presence of God and expect to be received by a holy God apart from a mediator, apart from sacrifices. That's why the language of fearing God sounds a little strange to our ears. We're not 100% comfortable with talking a lot about fearing God or the fear of God. But if you and I had been with the Israelites that day at the foot of Mount Sinai, that would have been the most natural way in the world for us to speak.

Jesus Christ: The Perfect Mediator

Now the Israelites had Moses, they had animal sacrifices, they had an altar of stone and earth, but we have something much better than all of that. We have the son of God, Jesus Christ. And he is everything that this passage is pointing towards. He is a mediator, he is the perfect mediator. He is himself the perfect sacrifice. He is the one through whom we can with confidence come into the presence of God.

God has given us, he has given humanity one and only one mediator, only one through whom we can come to God, and that is his son, Jesus Christ. 1 Timothy 2, 5, and 6 says, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all." And what a far superior mediator we have in the person of Jesus Christ, far better than Moses. Moses was a great man, but he was only a man. He was human. But Jesus, he is the God-man. He is true God, true man, fully human, fully divine.

Because he is true man, he can represent you, he can represent me. He is one with us in his humanity. He can come before God in our place as man and for us. And he is fully divine so that when Jesus comes to us, it is not just a great man coming to us, but it is God himself. It is the father who comes to us in the person of his son.

I once met an army chaplain who had served as an enlisted soldier before he became a chaplain in the army. And he told me that as a soldier, before he was a chaplain, he had served and he was in combat missions. And apparently, he could wear on his chaplain uniform a certain badge that indicated that he had been involved in combat. And he said that when another soldier would see that badge, it would create an immediate connection or rapport between the chaplain and that soldier. There would be this immediate relation between them because the soldier would see the badge and he would say, "Oh, this guy's one of us. He knows what it's like. He knows that experience of being in combat. He didn't just come right out of seminary, but he's been there. He knows what it's like."

And in the incarnation, when the son of God took on our flesh, when he became man, he put on a badge of humanity, our human nature. And it tells us he is one of us. He knows what it's like to live in this fallen world. He was made like us in every way, except for sin. And that's a good thing that he's free from sin. But he's made like us in every way. He shares fully in our humanity. He knows what it's like to be tempted and tried. He knows that experience that you have

experienced, what it's like to suffer, to grieve. He knows what it's like to be the victim of the sins of others. Jesus knows what it's like to serve God in a world that is hostile to God and His righteousness. And so He is filled with compassion, with sympathy, with mercy towards us in our weakness, in our creatureliness, in our humanity. He is able to sympathize with you and me.

And at the same time, Jesus is fully divine. And so to have Jesus with us is to have God with us. So he is the perfect mediator. He is the one mediator between you and God. There is no man, there is no priest, there is no pastor, no church that can stand between you and God. Only Jesus Christ can do that. That's why it says in Acts chapter four, verse 12, "There is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

And this is really what matters when it comes to that ultimate question of, when I stand before the judgment throne, when I stand before God, the only question that really matters is this: will you have a mediator? Will you have one who can plead for you? Because if Jesus Christ is not your mediator before God, it does not matter how much good you have done. It does not matter how moral and upright you have been. You cannot be saved apart from Christ. At the same time, if Christ is your mediator, if He is your Savior and Lord by faith in Him, then it does not matter how much bad you have done. It does not matter how sinful you have been in this life. If you truly belong to Christ by faith, you will not be condemned.

Can you say, "My hope of salvation is not in myself, not in my good works, not in my decency, not in my morality, not in my being even a good Christian, but my salvation, my hope on that day of judgment is that the Lord Jesus Christ is standing for me, that he speaks for me. He pleads for me. He is my mediator."

Jesus Christ: The Perfect Sacrifice

And Jesus is also himself the one perfect sacrifice that takes away your sins forever. The Israelites knew, again, that they could not come before the living God without the shedding of blood, without a sacrificial animal being slaughtered. And as a sinner, you cannot come before God without the shedding of blood. Hebrews 9:21 says, "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins." And of course, with Jesus, the blood he brings is not the blood of animals. The altar he uses for his sacrifice is not an altar of earth or stones, but the blood that he brings to God the judge is his very own blood.

And the altar at which he offered that was the cross. And there on the cross, Jesus offered to God the only blood that can take away your sin, that can take away my sin. And know this, because of who Jesus is, because he is God himself in the flesh, the blood that he shed has infinite value, infinite worth. His blood is able to atone for all your sin, all your guilt, no matter how heinous, no matter how evil it is, the blood of Jesus purifies and cleanses you from all unrighteousness.

As we saw in our passage, one of the features of the altar on which the Israelites were to bring their sacrifices was that it could not be the handiwork or the craftsmanship of man. It was to be made of earth, dirt, or uncut stones. And in this way, the Lord was showing the Israelites, He was teaching them that for them to come near to God, for them to be accepted into His presence, that was a work of God alone. It was God alone who would bring the Israelites to Him. It was not the work of man.

And how much more true is that when we consider the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the ministry of Christ in bringing us to God? No human being offered Christ as a sacrifice to God. He willingly offered himself up to God as a sacrifice. No human, no man helped God or helped Jesus in his earthly ministry. In fact, we did the opposite. We did not ask God to send us his son, Jesus Christ. In fact, we did not want Christ to come into the world. We did not help Christ at all, but we hated him. We opposed him. The work of salvation that Jesus Christ accomplished for you and me in his ministry, his life, death, and resurrection was entirely of God. It was not of man. So that our salvation, all the glory for our salvation goes to God alone.

I once knew a defense attorney who happened to be a Christian. And by the way, I did not know him on a professional basis, in case you're wondering, but if someone questioned his work—he defended criminals—if someone questioned him about that, he would probably say alleged criminals, but he would remind them that as Christians, we ourselves need and we have a defense attorney. Jesus is for us our defense attorney. He stands beside us. Before God, the judge, he is our advocate, our counselor.

And the plea of Jesus is not like a defense lawyer might say in a court of law, "My client is innocent because you cannot prove that he broke the law," or "My client is innocent because he did not break the law." Jesus does not plead that, but Jesus says, "My client is innocent because although he did break the law, although he is guilty of all that he has been charged with, nevertheless, I have suffered for him. In the sacrifice of my own life, I have satisfied the

demands of the law, the penalty of the law, death to the one who breaks it. I have endured that judgment and punishment on his behalf. Therefore, he is innocent."

That is the plea that Christ makes for you and me. And God hears his son. God hears the plea of his son, Jesus Christ. And he says, "Yes, this one is innocent. He is righteous. He is forgiven. No judgment, no condemnation. He is set free because of what Christ has done."

God's Holiness and Love

So Christ is both your mediator and your sacrifice. Now, it would be wrong for us to think that because Jesus is our mediator before God, that somehow that means that Jesus saves us from the wrath of his heavenly father who himself has no care or concern for us personally. That would be far from the truth. The truth is far more glorious than that, and that is this: it was because the father so loved sinners, because God so loved the world, the sinful world, sinners such as you and me, because of his love, he sent his son into the world. He willed to save his people who were lost in sin through the mediation, through the ministry of his son, Jesus Christ.

And you could see something of that truth, even here in this passage in Exodus, when we consider Exodus in the context of the whole book. What is standing behind everything in God's dealings with his people? It is his love for his people, that they are His chosen, those upon whom He has set His love and affection. And so even in the midst of this terrifying display of the searing holiness, the awesome majesty of God, even in the midst of all this, the Lord declares to the Israelites that His purposes for them are good, for their good. He says in verse 24, "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you."

And so all that God did here was in order to bless the Israelites, to show them good. Even the revelation of his glory and greatness that terrified the Israelites so much, that was for their good as well. Look at verse 20. Verse 20 says, "Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear for God has come to test you that the fear of him may be before you so that you may not sin.'" And so the purpose of God in instilling this fear in the Israelites was so that they would not sin against him. Notice how Moses says, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you." It almost sounds like Moses is contradicting himself. Do not fear, but do fear.

But what that means is, Moses is saying, do not be afraid of God that he is about to destroy you or crush you. Do not be afraid of what God might do now that you have witnessed His majesty

and His glory and His holiness. He has not revealed this to you in order to destroy you, but He has done it for the opposite reason, to put in your hearts a good, a healthy fear of Him so that you would not sin against Him, so that you will not meet Him in judgment. In other words, the fear of God is ultimately, fundamentally a good thing. It is a good thing.

A child may fear his father when he's in trouble, but his father always has his best interest in heart. His father's discipline is for his son's or daughter's good. And this is the sort of fear that we are to have of God, not an abject terror, the abject terror of a subject before a cruel and heartless king, but the respectful fear of a child towards his father, whom he loves and adores. The fear of a child who the last thing he wants to do is displease his father.

And also the rules for the sacrifices that the Lord gave to Moses, this also was for their good. The purpose of these sacrifices was so that through the atonement that was made in these sacrifices, or at least signified in these sacrifices, they could come into God's presence. And so the underlying goal here with these sacrifices was for the Israelites to enjoy fellowship and communion with God. In fact, the peace offering is also translated sometimes the fellowship offering, so that they could have that communion with God.

That's the reason why the Lord says in verse 23, "You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourself gods of gold." God was jealous for his people. He was jealous that they would be devoted to him alone. He wanted them to know him and worship him alone. And when we worship an idol, we take that love and affection and devotion that belongs to the Lord, and we place it on some thing or someone, and so we rob God of that communion that he wills to have with us. We rob ourselves of that blessedness that is found only in that communion with the Lord who created us.

From the Old Covenant to the New Covenant

And so everything here in this passage, the dreadful display of God's majesty, the laws for his sacrifices, this was all for Israel's good. And yet, and yet when you read this passage, what you're impressed with, what you come away with is just that fear that the Israelites had. They stood far off. They begged Moses to go into the presence of the Lord.

But things are different now. With the coming of Jesus Christ, with the appearance of the one who is the fulfillment of everything here, the true mediator, the true sacrifice, the goodness of

God, the love of God, the grace of God have come now to the foreground. The grace of God, the love of God, and now much more clearly and gloriously revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, God loved his people then just as he does now, but now with the coming of Christ, we see that so much more wondrously.

And this is the progress that the scripture shows us of the work of God for his people from the old covenant to the new covenant. That's why we read from Hebrews chapter 12. Because in Hebrews, the author there in chapter 12, he's comparing the situation of the Israelites here in Exodus with our situation as believers in Jesus Christ. And he says, you have not come to the terrifying presence of God at Mount Sinai, but he says, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels of festal gathering, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkle blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

If the goodness and love of God was the reality behind everything that we read about here in Exodus, how much more is the love of God the reality behind his sending his son, Jesus Christ, into the world? Because he loved sinners such as us, He has given us his son. And so put your hope in Christ. Outside of Jesus Christ, there is no salvation. But if you are in Christ by faith, if you belong to Jesus by faith in Him, you have a perfect Savior. And you have the promise that there is nothing in all creation that will ever separate you from the love that God has for you in His Son, Jesus Christ. Let's pray.