

Hebrews 12:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

(For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:

Analysis

For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:

This explains Israel's terror—they 'could not endure' (ouk epheron, οὐκ ἔφερον, 'could not bear') God's commands, particularly the prohibition against touching Sinai. Even animals that accidentally touched the mountain faced immediate execution by stoning or arrow, without the executioner approaching close enough to touch the defiled animal (Exodus 19:12-13). This extreme regulation emphasized God's absolute holiness and the defiling nature of sin.

The requirement to kill even innocent animals illustrated that nothing unclean could approach God's holy presence without destruction. This foreshadowed that sin brings death (Romans 6:23) and that approaching holy God in sinful state means judgment. The Law's strict demands weren't arbitrary cruelty but revelation of God's character—He is infinitely holy and cannot tolerate sin. Only perfect obedience suffices; one violation brings curse (Galatians 3:10).

This prepares readers to appreciate Christ's work. We couldn't endure Law's demands; we all touch the holy mountain in sinful state deserving death. But Christ endured Law's demands perfectly on our behalf, bearing the curse we deserved (Galatians 3:13). His perfect obedience and substitutionary death enable sinful humans to approach holy God without destruction. The unendurable demands become opportunities for appreciating grace.

Historical Context

Exodus 19:12-13 records God's command that anyone or anything touching Mount Sinai during His descent would die. Executioners must stone or shoot the violator from distance without touching them, preventing defilement from spreading. This demonstrated sin's contagious nature and God's holiness's severity. Ancient Near Eastern theophanies often featured terrifying elements but rarely such strict untouchability. God's presence at Sinai was so holy, so dangerous to sinners, that even innocent animals straying near meant death. This would profoundly impress upon Israel their distance from God and need for mediation. First-century readers, familiar with these Exodus accounts, would appreciate the author's point: Christ removes the barrier, making the unapproachable God accessible.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does the severity of Sinai's restrictions help you appreciate Christ making God approachable?
2. What does the command to kill even animals teach about sin's seriousness and God's holiness?
3. In what ways should you respond to the grace that allows you to approach God when the Old Covenant demanded distance?

Interlinear Text

οὐκ ἔφερον γὰρ τὸ διαστελλόμενον Καν
not endure (For G3588 that which was commanded And if so much as
G3756 G5342 G1063 G1291 G2579

θηρίον θίγῃ τοῦ ὄρους λιθοβοληθήσεται· ἢ βολίδι
a beast touch G3588 the mountain it shall be stoned or with a dart
G2342 G2345 G3735 G3036 G2228 G1002

κατατοξευθήσεται·

thrust through

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