

Hebrews 12:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)

Analysis

And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake: Even Moses, God's chosen mediator who knew Him face to face (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:10), was terrified by Sinai's theophany. 'So terrible was the sight' (phoberon ēn to phantazomenon, φοβερὸν ἦν τὸ φανταζόμενον, 'fearful was the appearance') produced Moses' confession: 'I exceedingly fear and quake' (ekphobos eimi kai entromos, ἔκφοβός εἰμι καὶ ἐντρομος). This phrase quotes Deuteronomy 9:19 (LXX) where Moses describes his fear regarding Israel's golden calf sin and God's threatened judgment.

If Moses, the meekest man on earth (Numbers 12:3), the friend of God, trembled at God's holiness, how much more should sinful Israel? This emphasizes that no human—no matter how faithful, chosen, or intimate with God—can approach divine holiness in their own righteousness without terror. Even the most godly stand as sinners before infinite holiness. Moses' fear demonstrates that the Old Covenant provided no true confidence before God, only increasing awareness of sin and inadequacy.

This contrasts powerfully with New Covenant confidence. While Moses feared and quaked, believers now 'come boldly unto the throne of grace' (Hebrews 4:16). The difference isn't our superior righteousness but Christ's perfect mediation. He accomplished what Moses couldn't—perfect obedience and substitutionary sacrifice enabling guilty sinners to approach holy God confidently. Our confidence rests entirely in Christ's work, not personal merit.

Historical Context

Deuteronomy 9:19 records Moses' fear when interceding for Israel after the golden calf apostasy. Standing before holy God to plead for rebellious people who broke covenant immediately after receiving it, Moses was terrified of divine wrath. The author applies this to Sinai generally, showing that even the greatest Old Testament saint couldn't approach God's presence without fear. Throughout Exodus-Deuteronomy, Moses repeatedly intercedes, falls on his face, and trembles before God. His unique intimacy with God never diminished recognition of divine holiness and human unworthiness. First-century readers would see the point: if Moses feared, how could they approach God? Only through Christ's superior mediation.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does Moses' fear at Sinai, despite his intimacy with God, demonstrate that no human merit provides confidence before God?
2. What difference does Christ's mediation make in your ability to approach God compared to even Moses' experience?
3. In what ways should you balance reverent fear of God's holiness with confident access through Christ?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	οὕτως	φοβερόν	ἦν	τὸ	φανταζόμενον	Μωσῆς	εἶπεν
And	so	terrible	was	G3588	the sight	that Moses	said
G2532	G3779	G5398	G2258		G5324	G3475	G2036
Ἐκφοβός	εἰμι	καὶ	ἔντρομος				
I exceedingly fear	G1510	And	quake				
G1630		G2532	G1790				

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 19:16 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

Psalms 119:120 (Parallel theme): My flesh trembleth for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments.

Exodus 19:19 (References Moses): And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

Deuteronomy 9:19 (Parallel theme): For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure, wherewith the LORD was wroth against you to destroy you. But the LORD hearkened unto me at that time also.

Revelation 1:17 (Parallel theme): And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:

Daniel 10:17 (Parallel theme): For how can the servant of this my lord talk with this my lord? for as for me, straightway there remained no strength in me, neither is there breath left in me.