

CHAPTER 19

“In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain.”(NKJV)

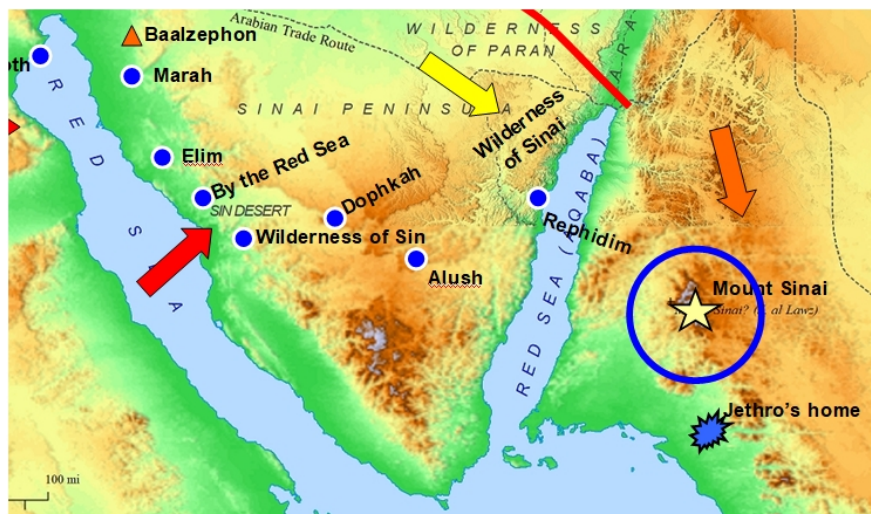
This map is already familiar to you, but as you can see, after the Wilderness of Sinai stopping point mentioned in the above scripture, I have placed an unlabeled marker about a normal day’s journey between it and Mount Sinai. It is unnamed because it isn’t mentioned in this text – probably indicating that the Israelites didn’t stop here. I only include it to illustrate that the distance from the Wilderness of Sinai to Mount Sinai was more than a one day’s walk, and “normal” travelers probably would have stopped there before continuing on their way. Of course, the Israelites are by no means a “normal” group. Jehovah is providing them a pillar of fire to guide them by night, not to mention the stamina they would need to keep going, so they could have certainly walked all day, all night, and part of a second day to arrive at Mt. Sinai in either 60 or 61 days.



[Note: To keep the two “wildernesses” mentioned in verses 1 & 2 of our text straight in our minds, and for the following discussion only, I will refer to the area that surrounds Mount Sinai in the land of Midian simply as the “wilderness” not capitalized, and I will refer to the Wilderness of Sinai on the Sinai Peninsula by its fully capitalized name. You will also see the desert of Sinai referenced. Though some say it and the Wilderness of Sin are the same, I believe it is more accurate to say that the Wilderness of Sin is IN the Sinai Desert.]

I believe this map will better enable us to keep the locations properly arranged in our minds:

The red arrow is pointing to the *Sin Desert* (also called the *Desert of Sin*, or the *Wilderness of Sin*). It was in the Sin



Desert that the Israelites camped twice: by the Red Sea and in the Wilderness of Sin. Do not confuse the “Wilderness of Sin” (RED arrow) with the “Wilderness of Sinai” (YELLOW arrow) – they are two different places, obviously far apart. The YELLOW arrow is pointing to the “Wilderness of Sinai” where they also camped twice: first at Rephidim and second further north (*shown on the map on page 1, just under the RED LINE that marks the edge of Egyptian territory*). The ORANGE arrow is pointing to a third wilderness called the wilderness of Midian. The BLUE circle around Mount Sinai marks the possible area in which the Israelites camped while at Mount Sinai. (*I prefer to believe they camped in the yellowish area to the west of Mount Sinai because it is flatter and has water.*)

The opening verses of chapter 19 (quoted above) mention **Rephidim, Wilderness of Sinai**, and simply, **“the wilderness.”** Though the third reference is a bit vague, it is here that Israel camped before Mount Sinai. (Blue circle)

We also know from verse 1 that the caravan moved on from Rephidim in the third month after leaving Ramses and “*the same day*” arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai. That phrase “*the same day*” causes some disagreement among commentators. One group holds that Moses is simply saying they arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai on the same day they left Rephidim, period.

The second group, however, believes Moses is telling us more than that. While they agree that the one-day journey from Rephidim to the Wilderness of Sinai took place in Sivan (*the third*

month on the Jewish calendar), they also believe it was accomplished on the 15th day of that month. After all, we know the Israelites left Ramses on the 15th day of Nisan, so this arrival was on “the same day” – also the 15th – of Sivan. This group also holds that the phrase “*camped* [*“pitched” KJV*] *in the wilderness*” is not speaking of this same Wilderness of Sinai, but the wilderness that surrounds Mount Sinai in Midian. This group believes the word “*and*”, which occurs three times in the KJV translation of this verse, is key because it represents three different “happenings”:

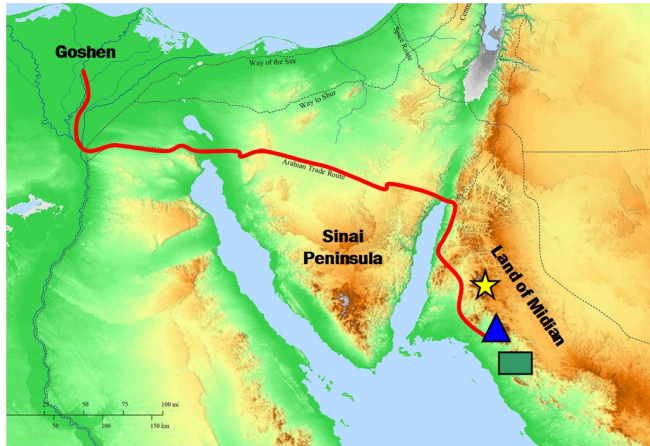
“For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount.”

- a. They left Rephidim “and” came to the Desert of Sinai (Wilderness of Sinai).
- b. “and” they camped in the wilderness (in Midian) around Mount Sinai
- c. “and” they camped at Mount Sinai.

If this second group of commentators is correct – and I believe they are – it means the Israelites arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai (in the Sinai Peninsula) on the 15th day of Sivan and pitched their tents there – exactly 60 days from the time they left Ramses. (*Incidentally, the 15th day of Sivan would be very close to June 1st on our calendar.*)

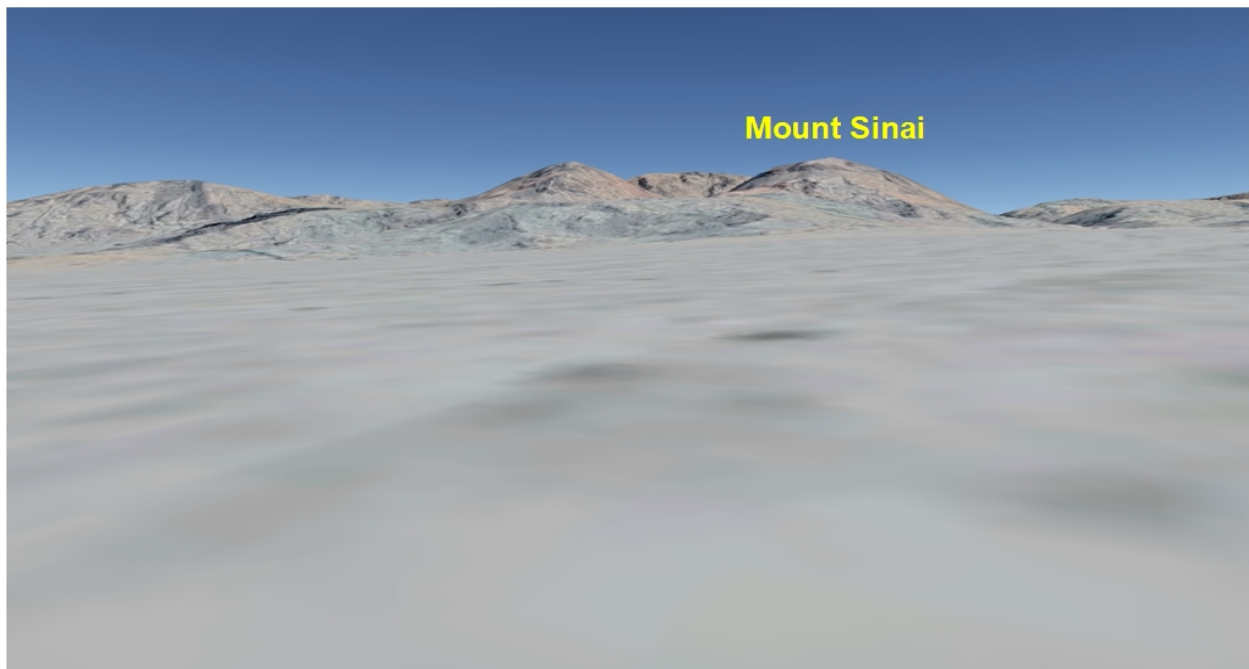
At the top of the following page I have placed two maps side by side to illustrate why I don’t believe Moses was in any way confused about his location (as some suggest he may have been) when he wrote the words that begin chapter 19. If you recall, when Moses was 40 years old, he had to leave Egypt after killing an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew man. We are not told why he ended up in Midian, but I believe it was God directing him.

The map on the left shows the most likely route he would have taken to get there. What I want you to see in those maps is the similarity of the routes shown in Midian – the land to the right of the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea.



On the left map, the blue triangle is the well where Moses met his wife-to-be, and the green rectangle shows Jethro's home where Moses lived for the next 40 years of his life – until the burning bush incident which sent him back to Egypt in a probable retracing of his steps. So I think we can be certain that Moses knew exactly where he was.

And now, in Exodus 19:2, the Israelites have made it to Mount Sinai in Midian and are camped in the wilderness surrounding the mountain. They arrived here in just over 60 days – possibly the 16th or 17th day of the third month (Sivan) in the year 1527 BC.





This screenshot and the one at the bottom of the previous page are two Google Earth screenshots of Mt. Sinai as it looked in a 1986 satellite image: The one at the bottom of the previous page is from ground level and this one from overhead.

Since the Israelites numbered about 2 million or more, not including livestock, we can't be certain where they were encamped, but I believe they were most likely pitched their tents in the flat areas shown in these two screenshots. Notice that there are two peaks side by side, the right one labeled Mt. Sinai. The other, to the left, is called "Mount Horeb" by the locals and is often referred to as such by Moses in the Pentateuch. Both are on the same "base" – especially obvious in the first image – so technically they are the same mountain, just two different peaks.

That being the case, it may be that some events described in the Pentateuch occur on Horeb and others on Sinai. By the way, if you Google "Mount Sinai," the pictures you will most likely see are of the "traditional" mountain located in the Sinai Peninsula and often photographed by tourists. We will discuss this a little further below. I measured the height of Mount Sinai in Google earth and found it to be about 5100 feet high.

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Ron Roberts

Lesson 12

It is the highest peak in the area (just barely) and I would venture to say a familiar sight to Moses during the 40 years he lived in Jethro's home..

On that June day (Sivan) in 1527 BC, try to imagine the whole flat wilderness west of the mountain covered with tents, with animals grazing and water nearby. The more severe wilderness lies to the east of Mt. Sinai, in the darker brown areas. Even though only a few miles away, that area is a much more rugged terrain with far less water, so I doubt they camped there.



The greenness of some of the area suggests that sufficient water flowed there from the mountains, providing grass for the animals and water for the people to drink. Even so, I feel sure God had a hand in providing the water because we can't forget that there were more than 2 million people in this camp.

Verse 3 tells us “...*Moses went up to God...*” It is likely that the cloud which had guided the Israelites during the day has now moved to the top of Mt. Sinai. If that is true, then it would seem logical that the cloud was not “above” the mountain, but rather encasing the top of it. We've all seen photos of mountains where the peak is wrapped in a cumulus cloud wreath or “cap.” But here, in Exodus, this cloud was not a natural meteorological occurrence. It was the symbol of God's divine presence. “*And Moses went up to God...*”

At some point before he actually arrived at the top – “*The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (NKJV)*

Jehovah refers to His people using the terms ***“house of Jacob”*** and ***“children of Israel.”*** Best I can tell, that first phrase is used nowhere in Moses’ writings other than right here. We know back in Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestled with the angel – and won – God told him: ***“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”*** Much like God had changed Abram’s name to Abraham, He at that point changed Jacob’s name to “Israel.” So, the “children of Israel” could just as accurately be called “children of Jacob” or “Jacobites”. Perhaps the Lord refers to them in this manner on the Mount because He is recalling His promises made to Jacob after the death of Isaac.

Spence has this to say about Moses meeting with God on the mountain: *“Moses, having reached the foot of Sinai, was proceeding to ascend the mountain, where he looked to have a special revelation from God. God called to him out of the mountain, and required a positive engagement on the part of the people, before he would condescend to enter into further direct relations with them. If, through gratitude for what had been done for them in the deliverance from Egypt, and if they would solemnly engage to obey God and keep the covenant that he should make with them, then a fresh revelation could be made, and fresh engagements entered into; but not otherwise.”*

More simply put: Before God was willing to make a covenant with the Israelites, he wanted assurance from them that they were willing to keep it. It’s a reasonable request. They’re only two months out of Egypt and already have shown their fear at being overtaken by the Egyptians and their dissatisfaction with the conditions of their travel and the lack of food or water. Many complaints have already been voiced against Moses and, more accurately, against the very God who delivered them.

But if they would agree to honor the covenant, they were promised ***“you shall be a special treasure to me.”*** They would become a separate nation – firmly united, living under their own law and solely acting under the direction – and blessings – of God. And oh, would they would be powerful! But that is only the physical part of God’s promise to them.

“You shall be to me ...a holy nation.” Not only would they prosper, but God would provide a way to save them from their sins, and make them righteous and holy.

When speaking of the forgiveness of sin under the Old Covenant, the question is often asked: How was this accomplished in a time before Jesus' death on the cross?

First, prior to the Law of Moses, during the Patriarchal age, it is certainly implied by the sacrifices of blood that were frequently offered. I base this statement on Genesis 8:20 when Noah ***“built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.”*** and in Genesis 12:7-8 when the Lord appeared to Abram, ***“....And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.”*** and other verses which speak of the blood sacrifice. You might recall that Hebrews 11:4 speaks of Abel, who ***“offered to God a more excellent sacrifice... through which he obtained witness that he was righteous.”*** And, in Job 1:5, we read that Job offered burnt offerings for his children in the event that they had sinned.

Going forward to sin under the Law of Moses, we get an even better view of forgiveness:

In the early chapters of Leviticus – in connection with their various sacrifices – Moses records that these offerings were a “sweet savor” to the Lord: (See Lev. 1:9; 2:2; 3:5, 16.) Then, in Leviticus 4:31 the nature of that “sweet savor” is defined: ***“and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a sweet aroma to the Lord. So the priest shall make atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him.”*** Of course, there are other examples too numerous to include here.

Moving on to the New Testament, during the period when John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness – still prior to Christ's death on the cross – Mark records in Mark 1:4 that ***“John came, who baptized in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins.”*** The key word in that statement – the one that answers the question about forgiveness prior to Christ's death – is the word ***“unto.”*** The actual forgiveness of sin was completed after Christ's resurrection, but they were credited with forgiveness prior to Christ's death.

Back to the story...

Verses 7-8 tell us Moses called all of the elders of the people, laid out what God had told him, and they answered, ***“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”*** With that assurance, the Lord then told Moses that in three days, ***“Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever.”*** On that third day the Lord would allow the

people to actually hear Him speak so they could know once and for all that Moses did, in fact, confer with Jehovah!

Notice the preparations that had to be made before the people could come near to God. The word “sanctify” is used, which in Hebrew is “qadash” meaning to “make clean.” This involved bathing, washing their clothes, and abstaining from relations with their spouses.

Verse 16 says, ***“Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.”*** And it is here that we run into another disputed passage centered on the phrase ***“on the third day.”***

More than a few commentators, apparently relying on the writings of St. Augustine, attempt to tie this event to Pentecost. We know it is celebrated 50 days after Passover, which in this case would be an actual 50 days after they left Ramses. They maintain that the phrase ***“the third day”*** must actually mean the first day of the month of Sivan. Remember, the Jewish calendar is based on the moon’s twenty-nine and a half day cycle, and so the rabbis decided all odd-numbered months would have 30 days and all even-numbered months would have 29 days. Nissan and Sivan – first and third – each have 30.

These commentators agree that the Israelites left Ramses on the 15th of Nisan, and say they arrived at Mt. Sinai on the 45th day. (*The last 15 days of Nissan plus the 29 days of the next month (Iyar) = 44 days plus the 1st day of Sivan = 45*). Then, on the second day of Sivan (*day 46*), Moses goes up the mountain and is told that Israel should prepare for the 3rd day when God would speak for all to hear. According to their figures, this “third day” would be the 49th day since leaving Ramses. And the next day, the 50th (that is, 50 days after the Passover occurred) God appeared on the mount.

As I said, their figures seem to be right... except for one thing: The first verse of chapter 19 says: ***“In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day they came into the Wilderness of Sinai.”*** We’ve already discussed this: 3rd month = Sivan and ***“same day”*** = the 15th day of Sivan... Therefore, on the 15th day of Sivan (exactly 59 days after leaving Ramses) they arrive in the “Wilderness of Sinai” (circled in blue in the map on the next page), NOT the wilderness surrounding Mt. Sinai, which we know is more than one day’s

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Ron Roberts

Lesson 12



journey away. So... their total trip was at the very least 60 days and we cannot say that the feast of Pentecost is based on the Israelites arriving at Mt. Sinai in 45 days. (More on that below)

I mentioned earlier that we would again address the traditional location of Mt. Sinai: If it were found

in its traditional location (as many assume) in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula (yellow star) as shown in the map on the right, it would beg this question: Why would God have led them along the yellow line from the Wilderness of Sin on the left, to Dophkah, to Alush, to Rephidim and north to the Wilderness of Sinai, and then bring them BACK down to Mt. Sinai via the orange path? It wouldn't make sense.



Looking at these two maps, do you remember, in our discussion of Moses' first meeting with God at the burning bush at the base of Mount Sinai, when he was taking Jethro's cattle further north to find better grazing? Did he travel up and around the Gulf of Aqaba, through the Wilderness of Sinai, all the way down to the traditional site of Mt. Sinai? No! Mount Sinai was less than a day's journey from Jethro's home as shown on this map on the left.



And one final thought on this subject: If you recall, the Sinai Peninsula was under Egyptian control during and after the time Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt. If the Israelites were still on the Sinai Peninsula while they were encamped at Mt. Sinai (traditional location), would they truly be considered “out of Egypt”? I don’t think so.

Before we move on, let’s spend a little time talking about “The Time of Shavuot,” or Pentecost, to see if it might relate to the Israelites arrival at Mount Sinai. I submit the following taken from “lifeinmessiah.org,” a Jewish website:

THE TIME OF SHAVUOT:

Shavuot is usually celebrated in late spring, late May or early June. In the modern Hebrew calendar it’s celebrated on the 6th day of the month of Sivan.

THE RECORD OF SHAVUOT:

Three Scripture passages outline the biblical observance for Shavuot:

Lev. 23:15-21 and Num. 28:26-31 – where Temple offerings are described; and

Deut. 16:9-12 – where the requirements for individual worshippers are outlined and where they were instructed to offer a freewill offering, to rejoice before the Lord, and to remember that the Lord had freed them from Egyptian bondage.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHAVUOT:

This was one of three divinely appointed feasts (called “she-LOHSH re-gah-LEEM”) decreed by the Lord as “solemn feasts” (Ex. 23:14-17; Deut. 16:16; 2 Chr. 8:13; cf. Ex. 34:22-23) during which the Israelite men were obligated to present themselves at the Temple. The feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles complete the three.

Shavuot, like the Sabbath and many of the other feast days, was a holy convocation or rest day (Lev. 23:21; Num. 28:26). Therefore, no work was permitted during these days.

- (1) It marked the beginning of the grain harvest in Israel.

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Ron Roberts

Lesson 12

- (2) It marked the countdown to the Feast of Weeks, the 4th of Israel's annual feasts. Beginning with First Fruits, 49 days (seven sevens) were counted, and on the 50th day, the Feast of Weeks was celebrated. (See Lev. 23:15-16.)
- (3) This period of time was, and still is, known as "seh-feer-AHT hah-OH-mer," meaning, "the Counting of the Omer" because of the ritual of counting the days from the "OH-mer" (Heb. "sheaf, measure") to the Feast of Weeks.

After the Bar Kochba revolt ended in 135 A.D. the Rabbi's decided to divert the focus of Shavuot observance away from agriculture and instead associate it with a historical event to keep the holiday alive.

This was also when the Jews had become an urban people, so Shavuot as a purely agricultural holiday had lost its significance. **The Rabbis suggested** that Shavuot would become the day that the Torah (Mosaic law) was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai (see the Talmud, Pesachim 68b). This was not done arbitrarily. Although the Bible never associated Shavuot with Sinai, this theme was chosen because the giving of the law had also occurred in the 3rd month (Ex. 19:1).

[End of quote from "lifeinmessiah.org,"]

Note the two underlined sentences and the bold type in the two paragraphs above: In 135 AD the Rabbis diverted the focus of the Feast of Weeks to a historical event, and they decided the giving of the Law to Moses would be that event! St. Augustine was the bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430, so he may have associated it with the events on Mt. Sinai, but that was not God's intent! God's intent was for this feast to mark the countdown to the Feast of First fruits, and had nothing to do with Pentecost.

Finishing our discussion of chapter 19...

Verses 16 - 19 of Exodus 19 say: ***"Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of***

the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.”

What an event this was: the Manifestation of God upon Mt. Sinai. The people had been made pure, “sanctified,” by bathing and washing their clothing, and the barriers had been erected to keep anyone from drawing too close to the mountain, now to be sacred ground. Though the people knew what to expect, I imagine they actually had NO idea what to expect. They were told to **“be ready”** and that **“the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people,”** but could they have had any idea what that experience was going to be like?

At the end of each of those 3 days of preparations, I envision families lying in bed at night, whispering their speculations to each other, trembling a little in anticipation of what they might see and hear. After all, they had already witnessed the power of God in their rescue, but to know that they were going to actually hear Him speak...what breathless anticipation they must have experienced.

“Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.”

Did they fall to their knees? Were they tempted to run? Did tears stream down their faces? We don't know, but the mountain actually quaked! Imagine watching a mass of rock and earth, 5100 feet high, “tremble,” just as the people were, in the presence of Jehovah. Moses later describes it in Deuteronomy 4, **“Ye came near and stood under the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds and thick darkness.”**

We know they were terrified. Chapter 20 tells us “*when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”* We will talk about God’s words to His people in lesson 13.