

SESSION 6

▶ God Speaks and We Respond

In Focus:

When we discover
God's will, we are
to follow it.



LOOK AT OUR WORLD

We often know what we should do, but we choose not to do it. For example, many of us can talk about the benefits of a healthy diet and exercise, even though we do not exercise or eat right. Even more tragic is when God's will is clearly laid out before us, but we choose to do things our own way instead. Ignoring God's loving plan for our lives carries consequences, but obedience leads to great blessing.

A key part of developing a biblical lens is an understanding of who we are in Christ. Being a follower of Christ means living under His lordship in full obedience. As we discern God's will, we are to obey it.

We are all involved in a sequence of choices. Those choices are either leading us into deeper intimacy with Christ, or they are causing our love for Him to grow dangerously cold. When God speaks, do not allow even a moment's delay in your response. Settle your "yes" in advance.



- **Would your parents have described you as a compliant or strong-willed child? How do you tend to respond to authority now?**

Choose to obey God's will.

Psalm 119:30-32

³⁰ I have chosen the way of truth; I have set your ordinances before me.

³¹ I cling to your decrees; LORD, do not put me to shame.

³² I pursue the way of your commands, for you broaden my understanding.

God speaks. He speaks through Scripture, causing us to understand His character, purposes, will, and ways. He speaks through prayer as His people worship Him and lay their lives expectantly before Him. He confirms what He has said in the fellowship and ministry of the assembly of His people in a local church body. He gives us understanding of our circumstances so that we recognize what God said as being clearly worked out in and around us. God speaks so that we will make whatever adjustments are necessary to join Him in what He is doing.

When God speaks, the only appropriate response is immediate obedience. Delayed obedience is tantamount to outright disobedience when God's will is clear. The psalmist used the language of *action* to express the depths of his

commitment to God; verbs like “have chosen,” “set,” “cling,” and “pursue” capture the appropriate response to God's revealed will (vv. 30-32). Put another way, where God's people are devoted to Him, they are simultaneously focused on doing His will. What a great summary of godliness!

Jesus told a parable of two sons (Matt. 21:28-32). A father asked both to work in his vineyard. The first was defiant and refused to go, but he eventually repented and acted on what his father had said to him. The second son was agreeable and vowed to go, but he never followed through. Which son did the will of his father? The answer depends on what is more important—outward appearance or inward reality. What is more convincing—words or actions? A changed heart is a willing heart. Both sons understood what their father said. Both sons comprehended the assignment so thoroughly that they could repeat it back to their father. The difference between them was not in their understanding; it was in their choice to act in obedience.

Could we say with the psalmist, “I have chosen the way of truth” (Ps. 119:30)? It can be difficult to confront the fact that I am doing right now exactly what I have chosen to do, exactly what my heart has been inclined to do. And what I choose will set the direction of my life. I do not get to abdicate to someone else the responsibility for the decisions

Obedience brings profound comfort in God.

I make. A well-known maxim says, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” Regardless of who first said it, the truth is powerful. There is a connection between our thoughts, our actions, and ultimately our lives. How we respond to circumstances is of paramount importance. New goals do not deliver new results; new lifestyles do. And a lifestyle is a process, not an outcome. For this reason, your energy should go into building better habits, not chasing better results.

The cry of the psalmist could well be phrased, “Revive me so I can follow You!” God quickens and enlarges our understanding so that we can eagerly obey His Word. We run to Him like children who run to their parents at the moment of their reunion at the end of the day. No other object is so desired. No other pleasure is so sweet. The heart prompts their action. Their devotion informs their choice. In our obedience, God opens up His activity in our lives. He nurtures in His people fundamental faith in His promises.

I sometimes conclude that my circumstances are beyond God’s control, when in fact, He is

at work in the midst of them. In response to the revealed Word of God, the psalmist prayed that his lifestyle would keep him from anxiety and further adversity (“shame,” v. 31). Our obedient response to God leads to profound comfort in God.

For more than three hundred years, Christians have benefited from the commentaries authored by the British minister Matthew Henry. His commentaries are notably concerned with the practical and devotional application of biblical texts. Of these verses he wrote, “The more comfort God gives us the more duty he expects from us. . . . The joy of our Lord should be wheels to our obedience.”¹

► ***What would it look like for us to take the psalmist’s actions toward God and His words?***

► ***What relationship do you see between our choices and God’s activity in our lives?***

In Focus: When we discover God’s will, we are to follow it.

Pray for clarity and understanding of what God wants.

Psalm 119:33-35

³³ Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your statutes, and I will always keep them.

³⁴ Help me understand your instruction, and I will obey it and follow it with all my heart.

³⁵ Help me stay on the path of your commands, for I take pleasure in it.

The phrase “some assembly required” can strike dread in the stoutest heart. Who has unpacked boxes of materials, only to discover that the instruction manual is missing? The picture on the boxes promotes the promise of a beautiful new cabinet or toy castle or grill. But without the instruction manual, the task is transformed from a rewarding weekend project to a daunting chore. Even those with an overly eager disposition—who tackle the project anyway (you know who you are!)—can find themselves in peril. The success of the project depends on the clarity, accuracy, and availability of an instruction manual.

Do you ever feel that way about life? God gives us a picture of what our lives should look like. He invites us to join Him

in what He is already doing in the world around us. We desire to move onto His agenda. But how? If the cry of the psalmist in verses 30-32 is “Revive me!” then the cry of the psalmist in verses 33-40 is “Teach me!” The psalmist asked God to give him clarity and understanding about His instructions. The humility and dependence of the psalmist are obvious. We can be certain that not only has God revealed Himself to us in His Word, but He is also the One who interprets His own revelation. What an act of grace this is!



All of Psalm 119 celebrates the reality that God has made Himself known to us. This means that the teachings of God—

His “ordinances” (v. 30), “decrees” (v. 31), and “commands” (v. 32)—are not the way to obtain grace but rather they *issue from grace*. The main function of God’s teachings is to show what the way of love and gratitude looks like in response to His grace! God always has and always will desire for His people to know how to live out the way of love and gratitude in response to grace. We follow His teaching not out of compulsion but out of expectant trust and exuberant worship. We follow Him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

The story is told of a father and his toddler daughter on a road trip adventure. Not long into the drive, the father noticed in the rearview mirror that his little girl had freed herself from her safety restraints and was dancing on the seat. He stopped the car, corrected his beloved child, repositioned her securely in her seat, and continued with their adventure. Before long, he noticed she had once again put herself in harm’s way to enjoy the momentary pleasures of car dancing. He stopped the car, secured his daughter, and drove on. Again, she danced. Again, he secured her. Again, she danced. Again, he secured her. On and on it went until at last, he fastened her inescapably in her seat. He was satisfied that she was safe (despite her indifference to his loving motives). His satisfaction was suddenly interrupted by his daughter’s proclamation, “Daddy, I’m still dancing in my heart!”

We do not just follow God with our wills, acting out of compulsion or fear; we follow Him with our hearts. When God gives us understanding, our response is unqualified

and heartfelt obedience. Because we know that in God alone is life and fulfillment and freedom, we pray, “Help me understand your instruction, and I will obey it and follow it with all my heart” (Ps. 119:34).

The psalmist had already prayed that God would enlighten his understanding so that he would know what he ought to do; now he prayed that God would affect his will, animating the active powers of his soul, so that he might do it. His earnest desire was to “stay on the path” of God’s will, because he took genuine “pleasure in it” (v. 35). The apostle Paul promised it this way: “For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13).

► ***What attitudes are essential to gain clarity and understanding about God’s will?***

► ***What roles do our minds, hearts, and wills play in our obeying God’s will?***

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ENGAGE

Wheels to Obedience

Write some things that fuel your obedience to God's will.

Write some things that are obstacles to your obedience.

Uses phrases from Psalm 119:30-40 to write a prayer humbly asking God to fuel your obedience and help you overcome pitfalls and potholes that prevent you from obeying Him.

My Prayer:

Desire to follow God more than anything else.

Psalm 119:36-40

³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees and not to dishonest profit.

³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at what is worthless; give me life in your ways.

³⁸ Confirm what you said to your servant, for it produces reverence for you.

³⁹ Turn away the disgrace I dread; indeed, your judgments are good.

⁴⁰ How I long for your precepts! Give me life through your righteousness.

There's a menace that lurks on roadways throughout North America—distracted drivers. These are the people who unexpectedly drift between lanes, swerve onto the shoulder of the road, and fluctuate in speed—all because they're engaged in activities that divert their attention away from the safe operation of their vehicle.

Whether these drivers are texting, applying makeup, reconfiguring their GPS, or retrieving something they dropped, their attention is drawn away from the task of safe driving. It's not possible to drive safely unless the responsibility of driving a vehicle has your full and undivided attention. Any distraction dramatically increases the risk of a crash. How dangerous is it? The U.S. Department of Transportation now claims that there are more than three thousand fatalities each year in the United States due to distracted driving.² This is a problem that has disastrous consequences.

If distracted driving is dangerous, distracted living is as well. The psalmist was adamant that we avoid distracted living at all costs. He longed to follow God more than anything else. The two deadly distractions that he shunned still tempt us and disorient us today: material gain and looking at what is worthless.

The psalmist's prayer is a twenty-first century prayer: "Turn my heart to your decrees and not to dishonest profit" (v. 36). The Bible repeatedly bears witness to the reality that my relationship to material possessions is a key to understanding my relationship to God.

One of the key struggles we face in North American Christianity is the tension between greed and generosity. How mature are we about generosity?

In Focus: When we discover God's will, we are to follow it.

Too many fall into the category of *infant giving*, which is really no giving at all. We abide by the “Toddler Property Law”: *Mine, mine, mine!* Others fall into the category of *childhood giving*, which is impulse giving—I give when I feel the urge or compulsion to do so. Some fit into the category of *adult giving*, which acknowledges the need for managed giving.

There is a further category: *mature giving*, which is markedly sacrificial. This kind of giving leads to a radical realignment of lifestyle. Beyond this lies the final category: *special grace*. This is faith giving—believing God for what you do not have and seemingly cannot obtain, in order to see God accomplish His purposes through you.

What breaks the hold of materialism on our hearts and moves us toward maturity? A responsive heart that God has turned toward His Word. It is God who can provide the spiritual direction and motivation to direct our steps (Prov. 4:11-19) and incline our hearts to do His will.

We must nurture a heart of absolute devotion to God. Be enamored by the richness of life in Him and let Him dim the luster of the “worthless” things that abound in the world around us (Ps. 119:37)—in other words, things that don’t have value. May we not get distracted by anything valueless! If we want to have the love of God rooted in us, we must first uproot our love for the world. Jesus warned us that the eye can infect the heart (Matt. 6:22-23). What captures my attention will soon capture my affection. We need God’s restraining

grace to keep us expectantly and obediently focused on Him.

Having recognized spiritually fatal distractions, the mood of the psalmist’s prayer changed abruptly. He issued a call for action. He asked God to fulfill His word, or promise of righteousness, to His servant (Ps. 119:38-40). Desiring to follow God more than anything else is done with delight when the heart is inclined: It is God’s grace that inclines us. What God has promised we must pray for. We do not need to aspire to ask more than that; we do not need to be so modest as to ask less than that.

When it is all said and done, the twice-repeated cry of the psalmist is the crux of it: “Give me life” (vv. 37,40). The way of obedience is the pathway by which we experience freedom to join God in His activity. The way of undistracted devotion to God is the way of worship as He moves us onto His agenda. All of this is possible when we hear God speak.

► ***What worthless things distract us from hearing God and responding obediently?***

► ***How can we nurture a heart of absolute devotion to God?***

LIVE IT OUT

When you discover what God wants you to do, the next step becomes clear: act on it! Choose one of the following applications:

VIEW OF GOD

When was the last time you clearly knew that God spoke to you? How did you respond? If you did not obey, settle that with God now. What do you expect God to teach you about Himself through this experience?

VIEW OF SELF

What act of obedience is required from you today? What implications are there for you? Write these things down as God makes them clear. Then ask Him for the strength to carry them out.

VIEW OF OTHERS

What opportunities has God laid before your church? How will you respond in obedience together? Meet with some other church members to pray about next steps, committing to follow through with what God reveals.

1. Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible, Psalm 119:30-32, www.biblegateway.com.

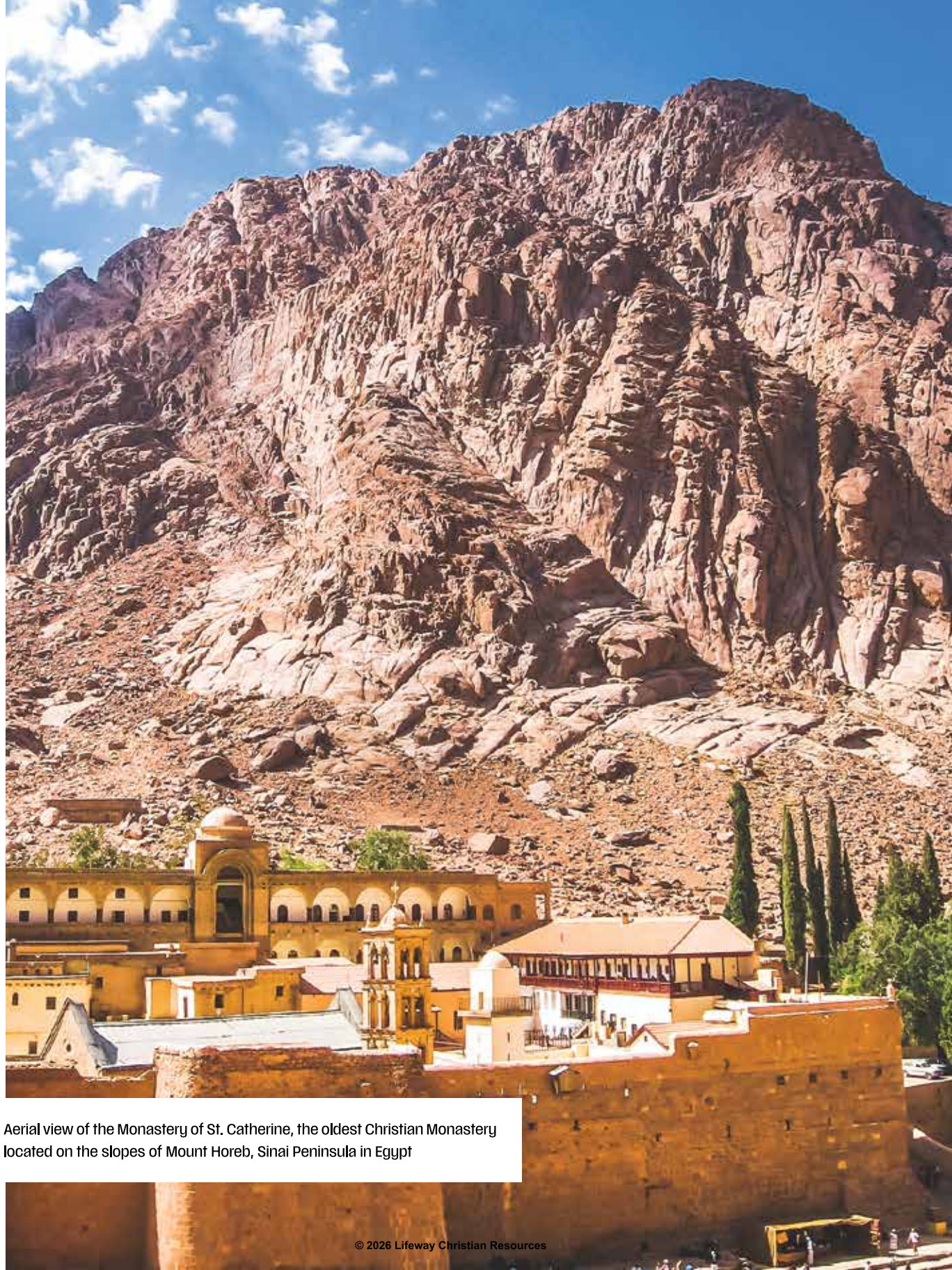
2. "Distracted Driving," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving.



REMEMBER

"Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your statutes, and I will always keep them."
Psalm 119:33

In Focus: When we discover God's will, we are to follow it.



Aerial view of the Monastery of St. Catherine, the oldest Christian Monastery located on the slopes of Mount Horeb, Sinai Peninsula in Egypt

God's Self-Revelation at Sinai

by Eric Mitchell

Much of what we know about God from the books of the Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus He revealed to Moses (as writer of these books) either on or in the shadow of Mount Sinai.¹ Moses met with God daily at Sinai, first in the tent of meeting and later in the tabernacle within the holy of holies.² Of the books Moses wrote, the book of Exodus was likely his first, recounting the deliverance from Egypt and the covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Some of what God revealed about Himself had occurred elsewhere (Eden, Ur, Haran, Egypt, and Canaan) and prior to the exodus. Here, however, we will focus on what God revealed about Himself at Mount Sinai. If the story of God's interaction with humankind ended at Sinai, what would we know about Him?

God first appeared to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush (Ex. 3). The angel of Yahweh appeared there to Moses while he pastured the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. There, God gained Moses's attention with the burning bush; when Moses turned to look, God called him personally by name. Through these actions God revealed Himself as being patient and kind and desiring a relationship with His people. He also revealed Himself as holy, for the ground in His presence was holy. God next told Moses He was the God of Moses's living ancestors and of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus God revealed Himself as Moses's and Israel's God. He revealed that He is all-knowing, recognizing the people's sufferings and afflictions, and that He had come to deliver them from bondage. In selecting Moses as the deliverer through whom He would accomplish this deliverance,

God showed He will not share His glory. He was more interested in using a humble shepherd than the mighty prince of Egypt that Moses once was. At this time, Moses asked God His name. The fact that God revealed to Moses His name shows that God is personal and desires to relate to us individually. God revealed His name as "I am," but the people were to call Him Yahweh ("He will cause to be"), which is the same Hebrew verb in third person.³ God is the One who self-exists and causes all things to exist. God here gave the authority of His name, Yahweh, to Moses.⁴

After they left Egypt, God led His people to Rephidim near the base of Mount Sinai, a place without water (ch. 17). God was testing their faithfulness. Despite their failure and grumbling, God was patient with Israel and stood (in the pillar of cloud) next to Moses when Moses struck the rock and the life-giving water flowed. God showed His faithfulness and provision despite the people's complaints.

When Israel arrived at Mount Sinai proper, God gave Moses a message that described how He had delivered them mightily from Egypt to Himself at Sinai (ch. 19). God offered His people a unique relationship in the form of a suzerain covenant. God stated, "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (vv. 5-6, NASB⁵). A suzerainty covenant was one that a strong king (or "suzerain") imposed upon

a weaker neighboring king or kingdom, who agreed to serve and give tribute to the suzerain.⁶ The Lord revealed Himself as Israel's Deliverer, Sustainer, Leader, Shepherd, Suzerain, Owner, and God. While God had permanent claim on Israel before, now they had formally agreed to serve Him.

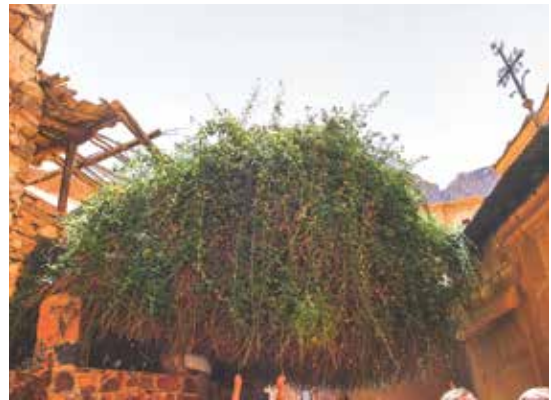
Next, God revealed His holiness by having the people sanctify themselves over three days and by setting a boundary around His holy mountain (vv. 10-17). God established the threat of capital punishment to give weight to the sanctity of His holiness as something Israel could not breach. God revealed Himself as real and mighty and

YAHWEH	PHARAOH⁷
Patient	Impatient
Kind	Harsh
Is holy—even the ground around Him	Few restrictions upon those entering his presence
God of Israel's ancestors	So-called god of Egypt
Knows Israel's sufferings. Plans deliverance and to enrich His people with Egypt's gold for Israel	Does not know God and does not care about Israel's sufferings—planned genocide
Will not share His glory	Pharaoh and Egypt stripped of their glory and forced to do God's will
Personal	Impersonal
Desires relationship	Desires service
Eternally existent	A created being
Causes all things to exist	Tries to control what exists in Egypt
Faithful Sustainer	Unfaithful and breaks his word; Israel has to fend for itself
Provider	Reduces provisions for Israel
Deliverer	Enslaves Israel
Shepherds His people to Sinai for a relationship	Chases Israel to destroy and enslave the people
Rightful Owner as Creator	Posing as owner
Mighty	Shown powerless through the plagues
Imminent	Distant—lived away from God's people
Suzerain King	Deceitful enslaver
Frightening to all	Lacked the fear of God and was judged for it
The eternal God	A mortal man

imminent when He descended upon Sinai in fearsome glory in a thick cloud with thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, earthquake and trumpet sound (vv. 18-25). This revealed God's power and majesty and instilled the fear of God in the people's hearts. God had told Moses He would reveal Himself in a cloud and allow Israel to hear His voice so they would believe Moses forever. God was concerned that His people would believe His messenger when he spoke God's words. God further honored Moses, His covenant mediator, and Aaron, His high priest, and the whole occasion in the eyes of Israel. He had Moses return up the mountain and then back down to the people with further instruction and then brought Aaron up Sinai into His presence as well.

In Egypt with its thousands of stone, metal, and wooden idol-gods, the people had only heard the stories passed down for generations of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They had never seen or known a personal God with power to perform great miracles. The only living "god" they had encountered was Pharaoh—who was no god at all. The self-revealed attributes of God at Sinai were thus essential in establishing Yahweh as the only living God. The contrast between Yahweh and Pharaoh was stark.

At Sinai, God revealed Himself more powerful than Egypt's so-called gods (including Pharaoh) and more powerful than all creation. Even though He owned Israel in multiple ways (as Creator, ancestral God, Deliverer, Provider, and Sustainer), at Sinai He politely asked them to accept Him formally as their suzerain King. Israel later built Yahweh a tabernacle where they would meet and worship Him. The tabernacle was similar in structure (outer court, holy place,



Burning bush at St. Catherine's Monastery. The monks living at St. Catherine's hold to the tradition that this is the literal bush that Moses saw as he talked to God.

holy of holies) to the war tent that Pharaoh used when traveling with his army.⁸ This contextual imagery would not have been lost on Israel. God would live in the midst of His people as their suzerain king. God sealed the people's acceptance of His covenant by a fellowship meal with the elders of Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24). Here the elders saw God, in what was likely a Christophany.

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1. Some passages refer to Mount Sinai as Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb may have been a lower peak nearby and connected to Mount Sinai (see Ex. 17).
2. This writer views most of these theophanies as the pre-incarnate Christ. See James A. Borland, *Christ In The Old Testament* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 1999).
3. J. Barton Payne, "484," (hawa: be, become) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:210.
4. See Exodus 3:14-15. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 122.
5. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.
6. Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 13-26.
7. As presented in Exodus 1-14.
8. Richard A. Gabriel, *Soldiers' Lives Through History: The Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 51.

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