

October 8  
Lesson 6 (NIV)

# GOD'S COVENANT

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## WITH ISRAEL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 135:1-9, 19-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Exodus 19; Isaiah 60:3

### EXODUS 19:16-25

<sup>16</sup> On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. <sup>19</sup> As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

<sup>20</sup> The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up <sup>21</sup> and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. <sup>22</sup> Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

<sup>23</sup> Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'"

<sup>24</sup> The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

<sup>25</sup> So Moses went down to the people and told them.



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### KEY VERSE

*Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.—Exodus 19:17*

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize what the Israelites were to do and not do at Sinai.
2. Explain why it was necessary for the Israelites to meet God on his terms.
3. Recruit an accountability partner to help him or her identify and eliminate a weakness in respecting a spiritual boundary.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. High Price of Doubt
- B. Lesson Background

#### I. Sacred Mountain (EXODUS 19:16-19)

- A. The People Fear (v. 16)  
*On Fearing God*

B. The People Approach (vv. 17-19)

## II. Solemn Message (EXODUS 19:20-25)

A. Calling for Moses (v. 20)

B. Cautioning the People (vv. 21-23)

*Of Gapers and Curiosity*

C. Calling for Aaron (v. 24a)

D. Conveying the Warning (vv. 24b, 25)

### Conclusion

A. Two Testaments—One God

B. Preparing to Meet God

C. Prayer

D. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. High Price of Doubt

Tommie Woodward moved from St. Louis to Texas in 2015. Shortly after arriving, the 28-year-old saw signs warning that alligators were in the waters of Burkart's Marina. He was more than a little skeptical. A marina employee warned him to stay out of the water. Woodward scoffed.

A justice of the peace summarized the ensuing incident this way: "He removed his shirt, removed his billfold, . . . jumped in to the water and almost immediately yelled for help." As a result of his disbelief, Woodward became the first person killed by an alligator in Texas in almost 180 years.

We have seen warning signs many times and in many places. God himself expresses his desires via warnings. He has warned his people frequently about the conditions regarding admission into his presence. Today's lesson considers an example.

### B. Lesson Background

As noted in last week's study of Abraham, part of the Lord's message in the covenant-making ceremony with that man was that Abraham's descendants would be in "a country not their own" for 400 years (Genesis 15:13). After that they would "come out with great possessions" (15:14). That coming out was the exodus, which occurred under the leadership of Moses.

Today's lesson takes us to "the third month" following the exodus (Exodus 19:1). Acting ungrateful along the way (15:24; 16:2; 17:3), the Israelites came to the "Desert of Sinai" and "camped . . . in front of the mountain," which was Mount Sinai (19:2). There they prepared themselves to hear from God. He had delivered them from hard bondage in Egypt and was about to initiate a covenant relationship with them.

The forthcoming covenant required preparation. Having called to Moses "from the mountain" (Exodus 19:3), the Lord instructed him to convey a message to the Israelites that focused on (1) what God had done for them, delivering them "on eagles' wings," and (2) what God intended to do for them in making them "my treasured possession. . . a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (19:4-6). When Moses relayed the Lord's words to the Israelites, they voiced their willingness to obey (19:8). Such a profession of commitment is admirable. But did the people really understand the challenges and responsibilities being placed before them?

Moses informed the people that the Lord would come down upon Mount Sinai to speak to them. But limits or boundaries around the mountain meant the people weren't to get too close. Only when they heard the sound of the trumpet were they allowed to approach (Exodus 19:13).

The people were also told to wash their clothes before meeting with God (Exodus 19:14); this symbolized cleanliness. The command to abstain from marital relations (19:15) was given so the people would avoid ceremonial uncleanness (see Leviticus 15:18). They were to be as fully prepared as possible when he descended on the mountain.

## I. Sacred Mountain

(EXODUS 19:16-19)

### A. The People Fear (v. 16)

<sup>16a</sup>. **On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain,**

The previous instructions to the people have stressed preparation for *the third day* (Exodus 19:11, 15). That pivotal day has now arrived, and an awe-inspiring series of sounds and sights begin in *the morning*.

Normal thunder, lightning, and cloud cover are familiar. But this situation is anything but normal! "A pillar of a cloud" had guided the people during their departure from Egypt (Exodus 13:21) and protected them when the Egyptian army pursued (14:19, 20). On other occasions, the Lord speaks to individuals from a cloud (Numbers 12:5-8; Deuteronomy 31:15, 16).

## HOW TO SAY IT

Abihu Uh-bye-hew.

Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.

Israelites Iz-ray-el-ites.

Nadab Nay-dab.

Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.

Thessalonians Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz (th as in thin).

Zacchaeus Zack-key-us.

Something similar also occurs in the New Testament (see Matthew 17:5). Further, a cloud "hid" Jesus at his ascension (Acts 1:9), and he will return "with the

clouds” ([Revelation 1:7](#); compare [Daniel 7:13](#)).

**<sup>16b.</sup> and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.**

This is the first time a particular Hebrew word translated *trumpet* occurs in the Bible. In common usage, trumpets will be fashioned from rams’ horns in the years ahead (see [Joshua 6:4](#); contrast [Numbers 10:2](#)). As such, these instruments will become familiar to the people as devices for signaling ([Joshua 6:20](#); [2 Samuel 15:10](#); etc.). Indeed, that is the function in the verse before us, but the nature of the *very loud trumpet blast* is anything but common! This trumpet’s sounding is God’s signal for the people to draw near to the mountain (see the Lesson Background).

The overwhelming nature of the visual and audible elements terrify the people; Moses is no exception (see [Hebrews 12:21](#)). The people fear death, should they approach close enough for God to speak to them directly ([Exodus 20:19](#), next week’s lesson).

### ON FEARING GOD

When a volcano erupts, volcanic lightning may result. The display is also called “dirty lightning” because it occurs in the midst of the ash being expelled. Someone has called it “the fusion of flash with ash.” Scientists know that it takes a powerful eruption to create electrical energy strong enough to allow study of volcanic lightning, given all the smoke and ash obscuring the view.

Scientific discoveries with regard to volcanic lightning might allow skeptics to explain away the miraculous element of what happened at Mount Sinai. But the survival of Moses in the midst of all the phenomena disallows this (see [Exodus 19:20](#), below). The thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai can be explained only as a supernatural act of God. All this brought the appropriate reaction from the Israelites: fear of God.

We should not expect to have such an experience today. Even so, when was the last time that a display of a force of nature caused you to tremble before the Creator of all such forces?

—C. R. B.

#### What Do You Think?

How can we resist the various ways that culture tempts us to lose a healthy fear of God?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding depictions of God as “buddy”
- Regarding depictions of God as “cosmic vending machine”
- Regarding depictions of God as “all wrath and no love”
- Regarding depictions of God as “all love and no wrath”
- Other

## B. The People Approach (vv. 17-19)

**<sup>17.</sup> Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.**

Moses has had his own experience of approaching the holy God. At the burning bush, God required him to remove his footwear because he was standing on holy ground ([Exodus 3:1-6](#)). No such act is required of the people here. They have been commanded to prepare in other ways to meet God (see the Lesson Background). Unlike Moses’ experience at the burning bush, the people have had time to prepare for this meeting. Ultimately, God is the one who determines what is an acceptable way to come into his presence (compare [Hebrews 12:22-24](#) [[lesson 12](#)]; contrast [2 Thessalonians 1:8-10](#)).

Moses takes the lead in bringing *the people out of the camp to meet with God*. But they go no farther than *the foot of the mountain*, which refers to its base. Previous instruction pronounced the death penalty for anyone approaching the mountain prematurely ([Exodus 19:12, 13](#)). That penalty is now lifted, since the trumpet has indeed sounded. The penalty seems to be still in force regarding physical contact with the mountain ([19:24](#)).

**<sup>18.</sup> Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.**

The scene intensifies as thickening smoke accompanies violent quaking. Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah will encounter the Lord amidst smoke and shaking ([Isaiah 6:4](#)). Given that the people are already trembling in fear ([Exodus 19:16](#)), how will they react now as the Lord descends *in fire*?

All of the phenomena associated with this experience are mentioned in the book of Revelation. These occur in descriptions of God’s dwelling place ([Revelation 8:4, 5](#); [11:19](#); [15:8](#)) and his judgment ([16:17, 18](#); [20:10, 14, 15](#); [21:8](#)). The phrasing *like smoke from a furnace* is similar to that in [Revelation 9:2](#), another terrifying scene.

**<sup>19.</sup> As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.**

The ever-louder *sound of the trumpet* seems to be a prelude to a conversation between Moses and God. The form that God’s response takes is a bit uncertain, since the Hebrew word translated *voice* can also be translated “thunder,” as it is in [Exodus 9:23, 28, 29](#); etc.

#### What Do You Think?

What safeguards can we adopt to avoid interpreting our own wishes as God’s speaking?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In assuming that what is loud and insistent must be God’s voice (compare [Job 38](#))
- In assuming that that which is barely discernable must be God’s voice (compare [1 Kings 19:12](#))

## II. Solemn Message

([EXODUS 19:20-25](#))

### A. Calling for Moses (v. 20)

**20. The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up**

The general statement of [Exodus 19:18](#) that the Lord “descended on it [Mount Sinai] in fire” is intensified and perhaps made more personal by the description here. Moses does not take the initiative to approach the Lord, but waits until invited to do so.

For Moses to climb *to the top of the mountain* is a hike of several thousand feet—and Moses is 80 years old ([Exodus 7:7](#))! But when the invitation comes, Moses simply obeys. There is no arguing as in [Exodus 3:11-4:13](#).

**B. Cautioning the People (vv. 21-23)**

**21. and the LORD said to him, “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish.**

After reaching the top of Mount Sinai, Moses is told to *go down*! This command seems to occur immediately after Moses completes his ascent, given the urgency of the message he is to convey to *the people*.

The command itself seems to repeat the warning in [Exodus 19:12, 13](#). Here, however, the warning goes beyond the issue of touching the mountain to the further possibility that the people might *force their way through to see the Lord*, thus violating the set boundaries. The temptation to look upon the Lord will naturally be very great. But the boundaries set earlier must be maintained and respected.

**OF GAPERS AND CURIOSITY**

Drivers in urban areas confront the frustration of heavy traffic on a daily basis. Accidents may bring traffic to a standstill until the wreckage is cleared and the injured attended to properly. Delays may be experienced not only by uninvolved drivers in the lane(s) where the accident occurred but also by drivers on the other side of the median of divided highways. Although no accident has occurred on the other side, traffic there may move slowly as well because of “gapers.” These are curious drivers who slow down to catch a glimpse of the wreckage. The slowdown is known by various terms such as “gapers’ delay” or “rubbernecking.”

Curiosity is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, curiosity leads to new inventions that make life better. Negatively, curiosity creates literal and figurative gapers’ delays; and fascination with the macabre can lead to further tragedy. We all can give examples of times when the maxim “curiosity killed the cat” proved to be true in one sense or another.

Curiosity proved to be a positive thing for Zacchaeus, who wanted to see Jesus ([Luke 19](#)). Herod also wanted to see Jesus ([Luke 23:8, 9](#)), but the outcome was negative because of his motives. Curiosity could have resulted in death for the Israelites at Mount Sinai. They were not to be gapers of God’s glory.

The double-edged sword of curiosity should cause us to examine ourselves. What things should we and should we not be curious about? See [1 Timothy 1:3-7](#); etc.

—C. R. B.

*What Do You Think?*

How would you go about explaining to an unbeliever the spiritual importance of various boundaries that God has set?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding sex
- Regarding the sanctity of life
- Regarding business ethics
- Other

**22. “Even the priests, who approach the Lord, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.”**

*The priests* are singled out for a specific warning. The office of priest will be highly significant in the religious life of Israel in the years ahead. The requirements and sanctified functions of the office have not yet been specified, but they might be in practice by this point nonetheless. God has already called the people to be a “kingdom of priests” ([Exodus 19:6](#)).

Perhaps the priests referred to here are the elders who fulfill a priestly role in various settings and circumstances. For example, “the elders of Israel” were commanded to prepare the Passover lambs in [Exodus 12:21](#).

However this group is constituted, it is clear that the Israelites understand who the priests are; those having such a title must consider themselves duly warned. They must not presume themselves to be exempt from having to respect prescribed limits.

Exactly how they are to *consecrate themselves* is not specified. Apparently it involves some kind of ritual or ceremony of which the priests themselves are aware. To fail in this regard is to invite the Lord’s wrath to *break out against them*. This brings to mind the image of a dam that holds back a huge amount of water; if the dam gives way, a furious torrent is released. Such is the wrath of God upon those who trifle with his holiness, as tragically learned by Nadab and Abihu ([Leviticus 10:1, 2](#)) and others.

*What Do You Think?*

How can Christians do a better job of sanctifying themselves in preparing to meet God in worship?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding things to start doing
- Regarding things to stop doing

**23. Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’”**

The reference here is [Exodus 19:11, 12](#), as Moses recounts the Lord’s clear instructions. People, places, animals, and things are all subject to being sanctified (set apart as holy) in one way or another (examples: [Exodus 13:2](#); [29:36](#)). Mount Sinai is among these in the current context.

### C. Calling for Aaron (v. 24a)

**24a. The LORD replied, “Go down and bring Aaron up with you.**

The Lord has a new set of instructions: Moses is to depart and bring back his brother Aaron. Aaron will be first to serve in the role later known as “high priest” ([Numbers 35:25](#); etc.; compare [Exodus 28:1](#)), so this mountaintop experience undoubtedly serves as part of his preparation for that important office.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What positives and negatives are there in having a close relative as a partner in ministry? Why?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In terms of accountability
- In terms of shared values
- In terms of supervision
- Other

### D. Conveying the Warning (vv. 24b, 25)

**24b, 25. “But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them.” So Moses went down to the people and told them.**

The Lord repeats the warning of [Exodus 19:21, 22](#), and once more Moses’ simple obedience is highlighted.

## Conclusion

### A. Two Testaments—One God

Passages such as the one studied in this lesson have led some to see the God of the Old Testament as remote and aloof; by contrast, the God of the New Testament is one of mercy and love. The New Testament presents Jesus, who came in love to save the world ([John 3:16](#)). To this viewpoint, the foreboding, threatening God-of-law has given way to the welcoming God-of-grace. One result of this faulty viewpoint is that some people minimize or ignore the Old Testament.

But are the presentations of God in the two testaments really all that different? No. A close look reveals many references to God’s love and compassion in the Old Testament and many references to judgment and wrath in the New. Within the book of Exodus, source of today’s lesson, we may consider the words of the Lord when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive again the law on tablets of stone: “The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” ([Exodus 34:6](#)).

The Old Testament prophets, who are sometimes characterized as little more than harbingers of gloom and doom, are just as passionate about declaring the depths of God’s love. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” says God through his prophet ([Jeremiah 31:3](#)). God is the one who “pardons sin” and “delight[s] to show mercy” ([Micah 7:18](#)). He is the one who casts all our sins “into the depths of the sea” ([7:19](#)). The picture of God’s compassion is just as pronounced in the Old Testament as it is in the New.

As for God’s wrath and judgment in the latter, one need only flip through the book of Revelation to be convinced. That book affirms existence of the “fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death” ([Revelation 21:8](#)). [Hebrews 12:29](#) tells us that “our God is a consuming fire,” and [2 Thessalonians 1:7-9](#) pictures the return of Jesus as a day when “he will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

The Scriptures clearly and consistently teach both the mercy and the wrath of the Lord in both testaments. A passage such as today’s should not result in viewing God as unloving. And the fact that he has come to us lovingly in the person of his Son, Jesus, should not lessen our sense of fear (in the sense of reverence) toward God. If anything, grace should enhance our reverence for the God who put strict limitations on the Israelites at Mount Sinai, yet removed such limitations when he broke forth into our world through a human mother’s womb.

### B. Preparing to Meet God

When I was growing up in rural south central Indiana, it was not uncommon to see signs (sometimes rather crudely constructed) along country roads with the message “Prepare to Meet Thy God” (from [Amos 4:12](#)). The Israelites in today’s text were told to prepare very diligently and specifically to meet God at Mount Sinai. Today we do not meet with God under the same circumstances as the Israelites did. Nevertheless, we can draw lessons from their experience regarding our own preparation for worship.

Many times we get so busy during the week, crowding our days with activities, that we find ourselves having little time to prepare properly for Sunday worship. As a result, Sunday morning finds us scrambling to get to Sunday school or worship—and perhaps arriving late at that. Our bodies may be seated and stationary, but our minds are racing in a hundred different directions. We are not really prepared to meet God.

A well-organized preparation for worship can seem impossible at times, especially in households with small children. But we can and should do better. We may simply need to become more intentional and deliberate about our preparation, formulating a plan for addressing distractions.

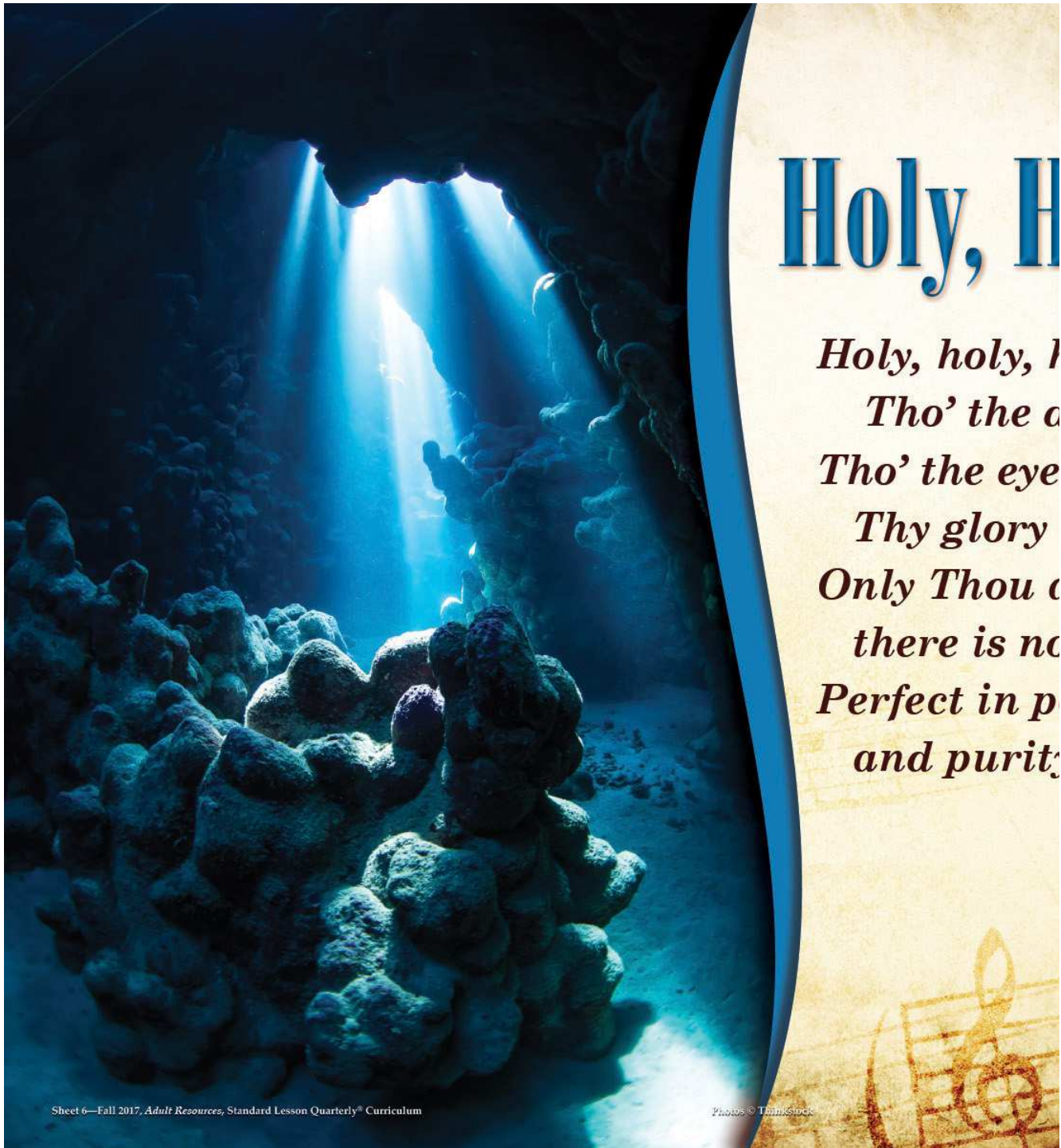
As with other areas of our lives, it is all too easy to lapse into less than ideal patterns of behavior and then become content to leave those behaviors unchallenged and unchanged. The ancient Israelites had a three-day warning to prepare to meet God. What would happen if we committed ourselves weekly to even a three-hour time during which we prepared to meet God in worship?

### C. Prayer

Father in Heaven, help us not to lose our sense of reverence even in—or especially in—this era of grace. May we allow the Scriptures to be our primary source of truth about you, rather than being swayed by the world’s tainted and often irreverent perspective. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### D. Thought to Remember

We must come to God on his terms, not ours.



Sheet 6—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lessons 6 & 7. Start a discussion by pointing to this hymn and asking learners to describe how God's holiness and love interrelate.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

Before class, write each of the following on a separate index card:

Keep Off the Grass  
 No Trespassing  
 Do Not Enter  
 Restricted Area  
 Private Property

Crime Scene  
 High Voltage  
 Beware of Dog  
 Employees Only  
 Quarantine

To begin class, ask for four volunteers and divide them into teams of two people each. One person on each team will give clues to his or her teammate about what is written on each card, without using any of the words on the card.

Send one team out of the room while the first team plays. Allow that team 30 seconds to give as many correct answers as they can. Then bring the other team in and repeat the process to determine the winner.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Silly Signs” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Use this as a small-group or whole-class activity. Students choose a warning sign on the page and give it a silly, incorrect meaning.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “We have experienced warning signs, real and symbolic, on many occasions. God also warned his people that there were very serious limits when entering his domain. Let’s learn more.”

## Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups. Each group is to create a brief role play in which a Christian is responding to a non-Christian friend’s idea about approaching God. The main talking points, for teacher use, follow in italics.

### Group 1—The presence of God can best be described as a place of peace and acceptance.

Respond with ideas from [Exodus 19:1-19a](#); [Romans 1:18](#); [Revelation 11:19](#).

*God’s holiness and power are anything but comforting and peaceful to sinful humans. His presence is not described as a peaceful meadow, but more like a volcanic explosion.*

### Group 2—Some people, being holier than others, have the right to come into God’s presence.

Respond with ideas from [Exodus 19:21-23](#); [Romans 3:10-12](#).

*No human being is holy enough to approach God. Even those in the Old Testament appointed to be priests had to be purified before coming before him.*

### Group 3—There are many paths to God; we come to him in our own way.

Respond with ideas from [Exodus 19:20, 24, 25](#); [John 14:6](#).

*Moses could not go up to God without God first coming down. Aaron, the ancestor of all high priests, could not approach God without an invitation. Today, Jesus is that ultimate intercessor who came down so we can enter God’s presence through him.*

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Serious Signs” activity from the reproducible page to be used as a group activity.

After either group activity is complete, have groups share their work. Comment as necessary, referring to the commentary.

## Into Life

Divide the class into small groups, giving each group pens and paper. Make sure Bibles and concordances are available for all groups.

Using the principles of today’s study and supporting Scriptures they can find, groups should create a brief tract called “How to Meet God.” The basic outline should be:

1. God is holy.
2. Humans are sinful.
3. Jesus intercedes for us.

After a few minutes of group work, allow groups to share their tracts.