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The Voice of Thunder and The Flash of Lightning

Thunder and lightning are natural audio-visual phenomena related to a thunderstorm or a cumulonimbus cloud, thunder being the result of lightning. Lightning is an electric discharge, either between a cloud and the ground, or between one cloud and another. During a lightning strike, the atmosphere acts a conductive channel for the electric discharge. Tremendous heat is generated in this process that causes the air to expand rapidly. This produces a shock wave that can be heard as thunder.

Lightning can be seen instantly and to great distances. The speed of sound is much less, and so the thunder is heard several seconds after lightning is seen. At places very far from the cloud, the thunder may not even be audible. The sound of thunder may also be heard differently at different places, from just a low rumble to a loud sharp crackle.

In addition to thunder and lightning, a thunderstorm results in a quick and heavy downpour of rain and squally winds on the ground. A severe thunderstorm can also bring hail, causing additional damage to things on the ground. Thunder and lightning can be fearsome and the Bible carries several accounts of how they made people tremble.¹

Very interestingly, 'qowl' which is the Hebrew word for thunder, also denotes 'voice' and it is in this sense that it has been used in the Old Testament hundreds of times. The

¹ Exodus 19:16, 20:18

Hebrew word for lightning is 'baraq' but it could also mean a 'gleam' like that of a flashing sword. The Greek word for thunder is 'bronte'. The Greek word for lightning is 'astrape' which also means a bright shine.

So as per the Bible, when God speaks, he thunders and flashes his lightning. For example:

The Lord thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded.²

After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice. When his voice resounds, he holds nothing back. God's voice thunders in marvellous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding.³

The Lord will roar from on high; he will thunder from his holy dwelling.⁴

The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.⁵

Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked.⁶

My judgments flashed like lightning upon you.⁷

On the other hand, when we see the lightning of the thunderstorm and hear its thunder, it is like hearing God's voice and seeing his glory. For example:

² 2 Samuel 22:14, Psalm 18:13

³ Job 37:4-5

⁴ Jeremiah 25:30

⁵ Psalm 29:7

⁶ Psalm 77:18

⁷ Hosea 6:5

In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud.⁸

That God's voice is like the sound of thunder is written in a New Testament account too. *Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.⁹*

Like other elements of nature, God is in control of thunder and lightning also:

He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.¹⁰

When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.¹¹

In the New Testament, in the account of the transfiguration of Jesus, we read that Jesus had gone up to the mountain to pray. *As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.¹²* This analogy with the sheer brightness and shine of lightning comes again in the New Testament. On the day of Jesus' resurrection, the women who had gone to his tomb with spices, had found the tomb empty. Suddenly they saw *two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.¹³*

⁸ Psalm 81:7

⁹ John 12:29

¹⁰ Psalm 135:7

¹¹ Jeremiah 10:13

¹² Luke 9:29

¹³ Luke 24:4

In the book of Revelation, there are numerous references to thunder and lightning, but there is one particularly interesting vision about thunder. John sees a mighty angel robed in a cloud and with a rainbow above his head. John continues: *And he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."*¹⁴ Here, the seven thunders are clearly synonymous with heavenly voices.

In the Old Testament times, God preferred to speak in the voice of thunder and to display his magnificent power through flashes of lightning. However, he does not always have to use violent nature to speak to his people. Just as we have many television channels and radio stations operating at different frequencies, God has his own channels of communication. The sound of thunder itself is different for different listeners depending upon where they are situated relative to the thunderstorm. For some people it can be loud and clear, sharp and resonating. For others, it may sound soft and distant. God can and does speak to us in many ways. He does not necessarily have to ride a storm to show his presence or to send his thunder echoing through the skies to make us hear him. He can whisper to us through a gentle breeze. He can speak to us through events, through other people, even through our own conscience. But more than that God speaks to us through his spirit that resides within us.



¹⁴ Revelation 10:3-4