

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 11

Chapters 20

The LORD sent Moses down from the mountain to the people to instruct them to get ready to hear Him speak. The people were gathered at the boundary line set by Moses; the elders were at the front next to the line and all the people were behind them.

Adam had heard the voice of the LORD and so had Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. Possibly Joseph had heard his voice too. Definitely, Job, Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad and Elihu had heard the voice of the LORD out of the whirlwind, but that story had not been revealed by Moses to the people at the time of this event. (The story of Job occurred during the time of Israel's bondage in Egypt. The Job story occurred in the Midianite region and Moses was surely aware of it.) Our knowledge of the extent that the LORD spoke to individuals is limited to the record in the books of Genesis and Exodus to this point in the story timeline. Therefore, when the LORD spoke to the people from the cloud that was covering Mount Sinai, it would be the first time that a mass of people had simultaneously heard His voice.

The LORD's Message to the People

Exodus 20:1 Then God spoke all these words, saying, ² " I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

The LORD identified Himself as **"I am the LORD your God."** In Hebrew, it is *Jehovah Eloheycha* (a form of *Elohim*). When he arrived in Egypt, Moses informed the people that the LORD Who had sent him to set them free from bondage in Egypt was *Jehovah*, translated **"I am the LORD."** The name *Elohim* means *gods*, whether the true God of the Father, Son and Spirit or the imaginary *gods* created and worshiped by man.

The LORD wanted the people to be aware that the same God who rescued them from Egypt, parted the waters for them, fed them quail and bread in the wilderness and gave water to them from the rock was speaking. What will follow in this passage consists of ten directives that will constitute the covenant between the LORD and the nation of Israel for all time. The first four lay the ground rules for the people's relationship with the LORD; the last six lay the ground rules for the people's relationship with each other. These two divisions in the covenant are combined in the following words of Jesus:

Matthew 22:37-40 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' 'This is the great and foremost commandment. 'The second is like it, ' YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' 'On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.'"

When Jesus answered the question and said, **“On these two commandments,”** the Greek for **“commandments”** is better translated here as *orders*. It was His summary of the ten *orders* or commands given in this Exodus passage and it highlighted the two topics which the orders cover. The orders found in this passage are not optional, they are required by the LORD in order for the people to remain in a proper relationship with Him. Furthermore, a closer look at these ten orders shows that they were given because the LORD wanted His people to live in a relationship with Him in a total different way than they had lived for 430 years in Egypt. In that sense, we see the purpose for their time spent in Egypt. Had they remained in Canaan all those years, they would never have been funneled into a situation where they would have been required to conform to a new set of laws as a nation, be restricted by their reliance on only the LORD their GOD and work as a nation to build and adhere to a lifestyle foreign to anything they had experienced in the past from the time of the flood.

Commandment 1

Exodus 20:3 **“ You shall have no other gods before Me.**

When the commandment says, **“other gods,”** the ancients understood it to mean *strange gods*. While in Egypt, the Israelites had become aware of many *strange gods*. The Egyptians worshiped just about every animal in some form as a god; if the animal was not worshiped as a god specifically, its body might have been revered as a container for a god. One example is the ox whose body was believed to be the home or habitation of the gods Apis and Mnevis. It was for that purpose that when the Israelites were instructed to go on a three-day journey into the wilderness to make a sacrifice, it was because the sacrifice of an ox would have been an abomination to the Egyptians because their gods dwelt in the ox.

In the last 90 days, the LORD had made Himself known to all the Israelites in such a way that they could not deny that they knew Him or how He protected and provided for them in many miraculous ways. No other god had ever done such things for those people or any others because no other gods exist. That does not mean that people would not create gods for themselves. The LORD addresses that issue next.

Commandment 2

Exodus 20:4 **“ You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ “ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**

Moses explained the context of this passage at the end of the forty years in the book of Deuteronomy as follows:

Deuteronomy 4:12-20 "Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form-- only a voice. "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. "And the LORD commanded me at that time

to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it. "So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. "And *beware*, lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. "But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today.

In this second commandment, the LORD is adamant that the children of Israel never create for themselves gods as was the custom of the Egyptians. To do so was mental idolatry! The first and second commandments are designed to eliminate the misery of the LORD's judgment for entertaining an affection for a god that does not exist.

In an interesting note, if a comparison is made between this passage and the stated Ten Commandments by the Roman Catholic Church, this commandment is conspicuously left out. To make up the loss, the Catholic Church divided the tenth commandment into two commandments. The Catholic Church is fraught with carved images and for that, this commandment causes great trouble and was dealt with by an outright intentional omission.

Commandment 3

Exodus 20:7 " **You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.**

The third commandment addresses the problem of an outward adherence to the order without an inner relationship with the LORD. When a person takes God's name "**in vain**," it signifies that the person has no intention of trusting the LORD and placing Him first in his life allowing other things to take precedent and become the object of his worship. The book of Ecclesiastes gives the best example of the definition of the word "**vain**" as *emptiness*. Breaking any of the commandments is a sin and this one is no different; it is a sin to claim that you belong to the LORD but fail to make Him LORD of your life. Such a claim is an empty testimony that will garner no rewards from the LORD but, in fact, will bring His wrath in judgment. With the completion of the New Testament, this commandment is defined completely. It is a sad thing to see those who have given lip service to a profession of faith in the LORD and, yet, continue to live rebellious, ungodly lives, fraught with troubles because of this great sin which brings them only emptiness.

Commandment 4

Exodus 20:8 " **Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ " Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. ¹¹ " For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and**

rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

In the beginning, the LORD rested after working for six days to create all things. The name of the seventh day was the “**sabbath**” which means *rest, repose or cessation from exertion*. This commandment covers every human and animal under the umbrella of the chosen nation, the holy people of Israel. The LORD made it a “**holy**” day, which means *to be set apart, consecrated, special and different from all other days*.

Four commandments are presented to regulate man’s behavior and intent to be acceptable to the LORD and remain in His favor. The next six commandments from the LORD regulate the relationships among humans to remain in His favor.

Commandment 5

Exodus 20:12 " Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

It is clear that not all parents deserve the respect of their children whereas other parents must be careful that their children do not fall at their feet in worship; this gamut extends in this passage from those who have the worst parents to those who have the best. With that in mind, children are to bring “**honor**” to their parents regardless of their character, status and behavior. In other words, it is best to interpret this passage as one in which the LORD requires that the actions of a child should bring honor to the parents. To extend this theology in application, every child of God should live a life that honors the LORD. The same kind of respect is due one’s parents. Whereas parents do not always bring honor to their children, the children should live in a manner that will would bring honor to them. Such honor does not mean that the children condone or participate in deviant, ungodly, illicit actions of the parents. As the children live, their reputations bring honor to their parents. People might say something like, “in spite of that child’s upbringing, he has turned out to be a great, noble and honorable man.” Such a testimony brings honor to the parents of that child even if they do not deserve it.

Paul quoted this passage in Ephesians 6:1-3 when he says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH.” Notice that Paul says, “obey your parents in the Lord” which indicates that he understands that not all people are in the LORD; however, a child of God should do what can be done within the limits set by the LORD to bring honor to one’s parents.

When the LORD says, “**that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you**”, it is a promise of *long life*. This promise was not for an individual’s life but for the life of the nation as a whole. When the nation of Israel brings honor to the parents, that nation will have a long life in the Promised Land.

Commandment 6

Exodus 20:13 " You shall not murder.

The word **“murder”** causes much consternation to many who connect it with war and the death penalty. A nation must defend itself from attacking enemies just as the Israelites had to defend themselves from the attack of Amelak just a few days before at the split rock. War is war; it is not murder to kill enemies who wage war against you. The death penalty is just that, the fulfillment of putting to death a person who has killed another. That topic will be detailed in the ordinances forthcoming in these chapters; therefore, it will not be covered here. In the nation of Israel, no one is to kill another person who is a member of that nation on his own. He is not to take the Law into his own hands to kill a person for something done wrong. Neither is he to act wickedly and kill someone in anger, hatred, etc.; the proper definition of murder is the intentional or unintentional killing of a person by someone outside the bounds of the law and without direct authority of the leaders of the nation.

Commandment 7

Exodus 20:14 **“You shall not commit adultery.**

“Adultery” is a violation of the marriage contract caused when a spouse partakes in sexual intercourse with a third party. Why does this seem to cover only a violation of the marriage contract and not immoral sexual relations between singles? Our western mindset has developed a difference between sexual relationships between married couples and single couples. What we fail to see in the passage which was clear to the people of that day is that when two single people entered into a sexual relationship, they were married because of that act. No ceremony was held to pronounce a marriage prior to the sexual act; when the two became one flesh by joining together, they were official married. All sexual acts outside marriage are considered adultery. This topic will be covered in the next chapters so no further discussion will be addressed here.

Commandment 8

Exodus 20:15 **“ You shall not steal.**

Theft of any kind is covered by this commandment from the petty to the extreme. It can include the smallest trinket to a human life; no theft is too big or too small under this commandment.

Commandment 9

Exodus 20:16 **“ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

In short, whatever is spoken which is not true about a person is a false witness. It can destroy one’s character, status, standing, spirit, livelihood and happiness.

Commandment 10

Exodus 20:17 **“ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”**

Just to make sure this commandment is understood, the LORD defined it in reference to a **“neighbor’s”** house, spouse, servant, ox, donkey or **“anything that belongs to your neighbor.”** To covet is to desire to personally enjoy as one’s own the property of another. Covetousness lies in discontentment for what one actually owns in comparison to that which belongs to someone

else. In many cases, the act of coveting leads to other sins mentioned before such as the longing for other gods in the hope of a different answer than the one the LORD is willing to give, the desire for what a parent has that is better than what you have, the reason to kill someone, steal another's possessions and even the theft caused in the act of adultery. This covenant catches all the wrongs that might have been ignored by misinterpreting the previous nine commandments.

Perception of the People

Exodus 20:18 And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance.

A inaccurate translation occurs in this passage when it uses the word “**perceived.**” The original Hebrew means *to see*. The people saw the “**thunder and the lightning flashes**” and “**trembled.**” When they had heard the words of the LORD in the midst of the storm, it struck fear in them as it rightly should. They had met the LORD their Savior and heard His commandments. From that point on, they were without excuse for any wrong they might commit. The Ten Commandments had been given; no one could say that they had not heard!

Request of Moses to Speak

Exodus 20:19 Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."

Meeting the LORD that day brought such distress that the people begged Moses to deliver the LORD's messages instead of letting the LORD speak to them again. The awe for the LORD's voice should not have been forgotten by the people. Nevertheless, it will be very soon in this story!

Response from Moses

Exodus 20:20 And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."

It was the LORD's intent to put the “**fear of Him**” in the people, “**so that you may not sin.**” The LORD wanted a holy people; He wanted people who would be in a right relationship with Him; He wanted to love a people who loved Him and obeyed His commands. He delivered the commandments personally so His people would be without excuse. He wanted a sinless people. He knew they would sin! He knew they would not be faithful to Him. He knew some would worship other gods, carve idols, work on the sabbath, dishonor their parents, commit adultery, kill, steal, lie and covet! He is God and He knows everything! Yet, He allowed them to hear His Own voice so that if they chose to sin, it would be their willful intent to defy His commandments.

Watchful Eye of the People

Exodus 20:21 So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*.

Once the people had expressed their desires to Moses, he climbed the mountain and went into the cloud where the people could not see him. He went to speak privately with the LORD.

Make No Gods

Exodus 20:22 **Then the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. ²³ ' You shall not make *other gods* besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves.**

In the cloud, the LORD told Moses to remind the people about His commandment concerning *strange gods* carved or created out of their imagination. This impressive comment deals with the gold or silver carvings of gods that might be worn on the body as the divine symbols of those whom they seek to worship. Were they allowed to carve images of the living God? After all, the instruction ends with words **“besides Me.”** The answer is no! The carving of God Himself should never be created by man. The instruction in the commandment was **"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.”** God is in heaven and an image of Him should not be carved.

Make an Altar

Exodus 20:24 **'You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ 'And if you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it. ²⁶ 'And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.'**

Although an image of any god, including the LORD God should not be carved, an altar was to be created in order to make offerings to Him. The altar should be made of dirt. If it is not made of dirt then it can be made of stones, natural in their shape as He created Him, but not cut or shaped in any way by man. Building the altar from earth or natural stone meant that no extreme cost would be incurred to construct the altar. Our complex God wanted a simple altar.

When the LORD says, **“And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it,”** there is a reason. The Israelites did not wear undergarments as we do today to cover the private parts of our bodies. As such, an altar that had steps to climb might offer an occasion when the wind might blow or the altar might be high enough to expose private body parts. In Egypt, as well as in the rest of the world, in the worship of their strange gods, people have built their altars of cut stone excessively high; the step pyramids in Mexico are a good example.