



## Exodus - Chapter Twenty

### **II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai (continues)**

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty

God spoke to the gathered Israelites and issued what has become known as the Ten Commandments. When he had finished speaking, the people asked Moses to mediate between them and God as they were frightened by his voice. Moses said God had done this to test them.

God then instructed Moses to tell the Israelites never to make an idol to other gods but to make an altar to God on which to make their various sacrificial offerings. Various details for the altar are given.

#### **II.b Exodus 20:1-23:33 - Covenant Words and Rules**

This section records what will later be referred to as 'the book of the covenant' (24:7) and includes: the Ten Commandments (20:1-21); instructions on worship (20:22-26 and 23:10-19); rules and principles for community life (21:1-23:9); and instructions for entering the land of Canaan (23:20-33).

#### **II.b.i Exodus 20:1-21 - The Ten Commandments**

The Ten Commandments, literally the 'ten words' in Hebrew, are highlighted as the core of the covenant stipulations revealed to Moses; they define the life that the Lord calls his people to live before him (vv.1-11) and with each other (vv.12-17). The commandments are not exhaustive even in the areas to which they relate, but indicate to Israel how to remain faithful to the Lord. After Israel has wandered in the wilderness for forty years, Moses will restate the commandments to the generation that is about to enter the land of Canaan; refer to Deuteronomy 5:6-21. NT authors assume the applicability of these commands in shaping the moral life of both Jewish and Gentile Christians, e.g. Romans 13:9-10 and Ephesians 6:2.

<sup>1</sup> Then God spoke all these words:

### Exodus 20:1

When God spoke all these words, he did so in such a way that all the people could hear and understand. As confirmed by the repeated description of the sights and sounds of the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai (19:16-20 and v.18 here); and <<*spoke with you from heaven*>> (v.22).

In reading and thinking through these commandments, it should always be remembered that Israel first heard these commands spoken by God from heaven in an audible voice. This made the strongest, most authoritative impression possible upon the people. However, the following laws were not invented at Mount Sinai. A few aspects of the Mosaic Law show new revelation, but for the most part it simply, clearly and definitely lays out God's law as it was written in the heart of man since the time of Adam.

The Bible reveals that the law is holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12). It also reveals that every good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17). These commandments are good gifts that came to Israel and humanity at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are good because:

- They show the wise moral guidance and government of God.
- They answer the need of mankind for moral guidance and government.
- They provide a way to teach morality.
- They would make the world so much better if always obeyed.
- They are good for all humanity; some of the Law of Moses is specific to Israel, but the Ten Commandments are universal.
- They are good when they are promoted and held as ideals, even when they are not perfectly obeyed.

<sup>2</sup> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me.

### Exodus 20:2-3

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. As a preface to the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law, this description signifies that Israel's call to covenant faithfulness is preceded by and based upon the Lord's acts on their behalf in covenant relationship. Israel's obedience to the commandments is the means by which they are to appropriate and enjoy what the Lord has already done by delivering them from Egypt and taking them to be his possession. The Lord will use the deliverance from Egypt to identify himself throughout Israel's history, often to call them to remember what he has done for them and to live accordingly. Examples of this can be found in Judges 6:8, 1 Samuel 10:18, Psalm 81:10 and Jeremiah 34:13.

You shall have no other gods. Yahweh demands exclusive covenant loyalty. As the one true God of heaven and earth, Yahweh cannot and will not tolerate the worship of any other gods, whether perceived or material items; in other words, monotheism, the worship of the one true God, is the only acceptable belief and practice, and is commanded by God for those who would call upon him.

In the days of ancient Israel, there was great temptation to worship the gods of materialism such as Baal, the god of weather and financial success, and sex such as Ashtoreth, the goddess of sex, romance, and reproduction; or any number of other local deities. Today, people are tempted to worship the same gods, but without the old-fashioned names and images.

Before me. This Hebrew expression has been taken to mean ‘in preference to me,’ or ‘in my presence,’ or ‘in competition with me.’ Most likely, ‘in my presence,’ i.e. worshipping other gods in addition to the Lord, is the intended sense here, in view of:

1. The creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3, which makes any other gods irrelevant since only the Lord is active;
2. The events in Egypt, in which the Lord displayed his superiority to other gods, as confirmed by Exodus 12:12 and 15:11 and Ezekiel 20:7-8;
3. The persistent call to worship Yahweh alone (Exodus 22:20 and 23:13-33, and confirmed by Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

Even though this commandment does not comment on whether these other gods might have some real existence, Moses’ statement to a later generation makes clear that: *<<To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him>>* (Deuteronomy 4:35); refer also to Psalm 86:10, Isaiah 44:6-8, 45:5-6, and 45:18, and 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

#### Exodus 20:4-6

You shall not make for yourself an idol or a carved image. The gods of both Egypt and Canaan were often associated with some aspect of creation and worshipped as or through an object that represented them. The Lord has made it clear, through the plagues and the exodus, that he has power over every aspect of creation because the whole earth is his (9:29 and 19:5), and thus he commands

Israel to refrain from crafting an image of anything in heaven or earth for worship. The prohibition is grounded in the fact that the Lord is a jealous God, refer to 34:14 and Deuteronomy 6:15, and that the Lord has no physical form, and should not be thought to be localised in one (Deuteronomy 4:15-20). Israel saw what happened to Egypt when Pharaoh refused to acknowledge what was being revealed about the Lord; here Israel is warned against doing the same, while also being reassured that their God is merciful and gracious (34:6-7).

A jealous God. God the Creator is worthy of all honour from his creation. Indeed, his creatures, especially mankind, are functioning properly only when they give God the honour and worship that he deserves. God's jealousy is therefore also his zeal for his creatures' well-being.

Punishing children for the iniquity of parents. Human experience confirms that immoral behaviour on the part of parents often results in suffering for their children and grandchildren. This is one of the grievous aspects of sin, that it harms others besides the sinner himself. However, this general principle is qualified in two ways:

1. It applies only to those who reject me, i.e. to those who persist in unbelief as enemies of God. The cycle of sin and suffering can be broken only through repentance.
2. The suffering comes to the third and the fourth generation, while God shows steadfast love (v.6) to another group of people, namely, to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments, i.e. to the thousandth generation, as confirmed by: *<<Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations>>* (Deuteronomy 7:9).

<sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

### Exodus 20:7

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. Taking the Lord's name in vain refers primarily to someone taking a deceptive oath in God's name or invoking God's name to sanction an act in which the person is being dishonest: *<<And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord>>* (Leviticus 19:12). It also bans using God's name in magic, or irreverently, or disrespectfully; refer to Leviticus 24:10-16. The Lord revealed his name to Moses (3:14-15), and he has continued to identify himself in connection with his acts on Israel's behalf (6:2-8). Yahweh is warning Israel against using his name as if it were disconnected from his person, presence and power.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

#### Exodus 20:8-11

Israel is to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. The Lord had already begun to form the people's life in the rhythm of working for six days and resting on the seventh day as a Sabbath through the instructions for collecting manna (16:22-26). Here the command is grounded further in the way that it imitates the Lord's pattern in creation; refer to Genesis 2:1-3. Every aspect of Israel's life is to reflect that the people belong to the Lord and are sustained by his hand. The weekly pattern of work and rest is to be a regular and essential part of this (31:12-18). In Deuteronomy 5:15, Moses gives another reason for observing the day: it recalls their redemption from slavery in Egypt.

<sup>12</sup> Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

#### Exodus 20:12

Honour your father and your mother. The word honour means to treat someone with the proper respect due to the person and their role. With regard to parents, this means:

1. Treating them with deference, as confirmed by 21:15-17;
2. By providing for them and looking after them in their old age. For this sense of honour refer to Proverbs 3:9.

Both Jesus and Paul underline the importance of this command, as seen in Mark 7:1-13, Ephesians 6:1-3 and 1 Timothy 5:4. This is the only one of the Ten Commandments with a specific promise attached to it: that your days may be long, meaning not just a long life, but one that is filled with God's presence and favour.

<sup>13</sup> You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> You shall not steal.

#### Exodus 20:13-15

The sixth, seventh and eighth commandments present general prohibitions not to murder, commit adultery, or steal. In doing so, they set minimum standards for Israel to be a just society and indicate the context in which the people will be

called further to be holy and to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and their neighbours with goodwill and generosity (Leviticus 19:18). Thus, while the prohibition against stealing is a basic principle of justice in Israel's national life, the people are called to do more than refrain from taking another person's possessions. They are to embody the Lord's love for them by loving the stranger and sojourner as themselves: <<***When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God***>> (Leviticus 19:33-34).

When Jesus refers to the law in the Sermon on the Mount: <<***you have heard that it was said***>> (Matthew 5:21, 5:27, 5:33, 5:38 and 5:43), he is correcting not the intended purpose of the OT law but the mistaken presumption that these laws, or their interpretation at least, were meant to be exhaustive of what it meant to live as a child of the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus made clear, simply refraining from murder does not fulfil the law when a person disdains his brother as a fool; or simply refraining from adultery does not fulfil the law when a man lusts after a woman.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents even more stringent demands of the Kingdom. While various groups of Christians today may differ concerning exactly how Jesus intended his disciples to interpret the law, one point is clear: Jesus was not an antinomian. He expected his followers to understand and apply the moral principles already revealed in Scripture, then to build Kingdom principles on top of that foundation.

<sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

#### Exodus 20:16

Acting as a false witness (23:1-3) suggests a legal trial in which false testimony could lead to punishment for one's neighbour. Bearing false witness is condemned in Scripture for its disastrous effects among people and its utter disregard for God's character; refer to Proverbs 6:16-19, 12:22 and 19:5-9. The Lord's righteousness and justice were to be reflected in Israel's life as a nation, which was thus to exclude speaking falsely, especially for the sake of gaining something at the expense of another person and perverting justice.

<sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

#### Exodus 20:17

While the previous four commandments focus on actions committed or words spoken (vv.13-16), the tenth commandment warns against allowing the heart to

covet anything that is your neighbour's. When a person covets, he allows the desire for that which is coveted to govern his relationship with other people; this may become the motivation for murder, stealing, or lying either to attain the desired thing or to keep it from someone else. Because of the way that coveting values a particular thing over trust in and obedience to the Lord as the provider, it is also a breach of the first commandment, which the apostle Paul makes clear when he refers to coveting as idolatry: <<**Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God**>> (Ephesians 5:5), and: <<**Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)**>> (Colossians 3:5).

<sup>18</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'

<sup>21</sup> Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

### Exodus 20:18-21

The last time Israel had experienced a sign of thunder and lightning, it was in the context of the plague of hail sent on Egypt (9:23-26). Moses tells the people not to fear that God would kill them, explaining that God is testing them so that their life in the land might be governed by the fear of the Lord: <<**Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long**>> (Deuteronomy 6:1-2).

### II.b.ii Exodus 20:22-26 - The Law concerning the Altar

Together with 23:10-19, these verses frame the first section of laws following the Ten Commandments (21:1-23:9) and focus on Israel's worship. Israel's relationship with the Lord is her first priority; refer to the sequence of the Ten Commandments. This is reflected again here in that these religious regulations precede those on relating to one's neighbour. These rules give more detailed explanations of the obligations implied by the first and second commandments in vv.3-6.

<sup>22</sup> The Lord said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. <sup>23</sup> You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.

#### Exodus 20:22-23

You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. This makes it perfectly clear that God spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel from heaven. This happened at Mount Sinai, but God spoke from heaven.

You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. Because God did not reveal himself to Israel in any form or image, they were not to make any other god of silver or gold to set beside God, even if their intentions for doing so were to honour God.

<sup>24</sup> You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. <sup>25</sup> But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. <sup>26</sup> You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.’

#### Exodus 20:24-26

You need make for me only an altar of earth. As God began this expanded section of his law for Israel, the first law mentioned had to do with sacrifice and atonement. This was in expectation that Israel would break the laws God gave them, and therefore need to atone for their sin by sacrifice, all with a view to the final sacrifice God would ultimately provide. God did not need an ornate or elaborate altar as seen in many church buildings; an altar of earth was sufficient. With God’s ultimate altar, a few wooden beams were sufficient.

The English word altar comes from the Latin *altus*, meaning high or elevated, because altars were raised to give them prominence and dignity. Yet the Hebrew word for altar, *mizbach*, has the sense of a place of sacrifice or killing, coming from the Hebrew word to kill.

Sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your offerings of well-being. The distinction between burnt offerings and well-being or peace offerings was given later in greater detail. Yet the mere mention of them at the outset of the giving of the law indicates that man cannot keep the law, and must make sacrifices to deal with this inability.

Do not build it of hewn stones. If an altar were made of stone, it was possible or even likely that attention would be drawn and glory would be given to the stone carver. God, at his altar, wanted to share glory with no man - the beauty and attractiveness would be found only in the provision of God, not in any fleshly display.

For if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. It is the purpose of the altar that is important, not its appearance. The same can be applied to the teaching of God's word, as Paul states: <<***My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God***>> (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Teachers are not there to draw attention to themselves but to bring glory to God through the teaching they bring.

You shall not go up by steps to my altar. God wanted no display of human flesh at his place of covering sacrifice. Steps might allow the leg of the priest to be seen. God does not want to see flesh in worship. What God does want in worship is seen by Jesus' statement: <<***God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth***>> (John 4:24). God wants worship that is characterised by Spirit as opposed to flesh and truth as opposed to deception or mere feeling. Deceptive hearts are revealed before the Lord and the heart in worship and sacrifice needs to be true so that your nakedness may not be exposed.