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C0633 – September 6, 2006 – Ex 20:18-21:11 – The Alter, Slaves, & Handmaids

At the conclusion of the Ten Commandments which only took a couple of minutes for God to say the people respond in great fear. They were afraid to the point that if God continued speaking to them they thought they would die! “Moses then explained that the proper response to God’s word is not a fear that causes them to flee from His presence but a fear which causes them to submit to him in godly living.”¹

I. The People’s Response (20:18-21)

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”

²⁰ 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.”

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

They **perceived** or **saw** this great storm of **thunder and lighting flashes and trumpet sounds and the smoking mountain**. This is describing the Shechinah Glory, the visible manifestation of the glory of God. All 2 million Israelites saw God through this filter and heard God’s voice utter the Ten Commandments and they responded by **trembling and standing at a distance**. Their knees were literally knocking **and** though they initially stood at the boundary and were warned against breaking through lest the Lord break through and they perish, they no longer want to break through and see but they want to back up and stand **at a distance**. I imagine we would all have this response if we saw a

visible manifestation of God. God is so great and so holy and so powerful that it would scare the living daylights out of us to see Him and hear Him. This is not a trite event. This is a serious meeting between God and man. Too often people take God lightly. Yet, when people see God and hear the voice of God they tremble with great fear and run the other direction (e.g. Rev 6:14-17).

Verse 19 **Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”** We can listen to another creature, Moses. To that we can stand listening. But let not God the Creator **speak to us, or we will die.** Simply hearing the voice of God led them to conclude that His voice could kill them. That is certainly true. If God can create the entire universe *ex nihilo* then can His voice not also kill? Of course, God had promised He would not break through and kill them as long as they respected the boundaries at the foot of the mountain. Following God’s word is always the issue. God said that if they broke the boundaries they would be committing the sin unto death (sin unto death has three characteristics: 1) direct violation of a revealed command, 2) directly against God, directly in the sight of God’s people). As long as we do not break the boundaries revealed by God which respect the Creator-creature distinction then He will not break forth upon us and we can avoid the sin unto death.

In verse 20 Moses tries to calm the people saying, **“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.”** Moses commands to **not be afraid** means do not be in terror of God. Though God has the ability to kill you He has not lead you out of Egypt and bore you on eagle’s wings for that purpose. Rather, He has led you here in order **to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.** The sight and sound of the Shechinah Glory should cause them to **fear Him.** However, this did not mean ‘terror’ but having a ‘reverential awe’ for Him. A reverential awe for God is at the heart of the OT wisdom books and is the first step toward obeying His commandments and avoiding sin (Prov 1:7). If they obey Him they will become His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6).

PRINCIPLE: Knowing the true God is essential to fearing Him so as to avoid sin and obey Him. It is a real struggle to know Him. Not because He has not revealed Himself clearly to us in His word, but simply because “the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). Many Christians have the idea that they can know God independently of His word, by way of a mystical experience; contemplation, yoga,

clearing the mind, and encounter. God cannot be known apart from His revealed word. Satan wants you to replace the word of God with these other devices so he can deceive you with false teaching. The only way to avoid false teaching is to measure it by true teaching (1 John 4:1-6; Matt 12:33-36). If you do not know His word you will not know the true God and you will not be able to detect false teaching. Inevitably this means you will sin more. Graciously God revealed Himself to us in word without which we could know nothing about Him. When we have a proper view of God we develop a reverential fear of Him. Fearing God is not like being afraid of a bogey man. Fearing God in the OT means to have a reverential awe and respect for Him. When we have this awe and respect it tends to keep us from sinning. To gain a deeper respect for Him we have to study Him. We have to pursue a deeper understanding of His essence. Really this is coming to know God more fully in a personal relationship. It's not an abstract, purely intellectual pursuit. It's an intensely personal investigation. As we realize who God is we begin to understand more fully who we are and the great chasm between us. God is not just quantitatively different than us, He is qualitatively different. God's personal self-revelation at Mt Sinai should remain at the forefront of the Israelites mind so that they would not sin. At all times the thunder and lightning and sound of trumpets and smoke at Mt Sinai ought to remain with them. It is essential to godly living that the fear of God remains with us. He ought to always be on our mind. If He is then this will serve to help us avoid sin which will promote the maintenance of fellowship and the building of rewards and an inheritance in the kingdom. If you wanted to be an unfruitful and unrewarded believer what would you do? Avoid the word of God. Avoid Bible teaching. Avoid congregating with other believers. Avoid confessing your sin. Avoid daily prayer. Start worrying about the things of this world. Start trying to get rich. Start desiring other things. That is a sure way to become unfruitful and unrewarded. Yet, if we love Him, we obey His commandments. If we abide in His word we prove we are His disciples (John 8:31; 15:31).

This is also really God's way of telling them they need to acknowledge His Lordship over their lives. They had freely entered God's kingdom through faith on the night of the Exodus (Exod 12:13; 14:31) but now they should earn an inheritance in God's kingdom through faithful obedience to His commandments.

PRINCIPLE: Salvation and discipleship are distinct. Salvation is a free gift received by faith (Rev 22:17). Discipleship is costly and requires obedience (Luke 14:25-35). To confuse the free gift of salvation with costly discipleship is to radically distort the gospel message. How can something be free and costly? The picture of the Exodus clearly distinguishes the two.

	Salvation	Discipleship
	Free	Costly
Human requirement	Faith	Obedience
Event	Exodus	Mt Sinai
Result	Enter the kingdom	Inherit the kingdom

Thus, the call to discipleship is not the call to salvation. The call to discipleship is for the saved. Faith in Christ is the issue for the unsaved; discipleship is the issue for the saved. If you have unbelieving friends or family you should be praying they would have faith in Christ and be saved. If you are a lukewarm believer you need to enter into costly discipleship. If your friends or family are lukewarm believers you should be praying they enter into discipleship. Here in the historical sequence of the Exodus salvation and discipleship are clearly distinguished.

Regardless of Moses' clarification that God would not kill them, verse 21 says **the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.** Moses alone would receive the rest of the commands from God and he would tell them to the Israelites later. The first law is the "Law of the Altar" in verses 22-26.

II. The Law of the Altar (20:22-26)

Many expositors claim that the 'Book of the Covenant' (Exod 24:7) technically begins in Exod 20:22 and ends in Exod 23:33. This book begins and ends with the prohibition of idolatry. Obeying the ordinances within the book would keep them from idolatry. The emphasis against idolatry makes the golden calf incident stand out even more boldly.

Before the ordinances begin in Exod 21:1 the Law of the Altar is set forth. "The point of the section is this: those who worship this holy God must preserve holiness in the way they worship—they worship where he permits, in the manner he prescribes, and with the blessings he promises" (Note in NET Bible). God does not permit us to worship Him any way we want. Until the 21st century church realizes this they will continue to think they are worshipping God but will continue to worship demons.

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.**

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 **'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, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.'**

These verses describe a very simple form of worship devoid of elaborate ritual practices. Verse 22, YHWH spoke to Moses and so Moses **shall say to the sons of Israel, You yourselves**, personally, **have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven**. You are *earthly* creatures, I am the *heavenly* Creator. I spoke to you respecting the Creator-creature distinction and I showed you no physical form of Myself so you cannot construct any idol of Me. I am the invisible God speaking **from heaven**.

Verse 23 is describing improper forms of worship in light of the first commandment. **You shall not make *other gods* besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold**. There is no form that can capture God, even one made of precious metals such as silver or gold. The pagan nations make their gods with silver and gold but you cannot make an image of God. Nothing in all creation can capture the Invisible God.

Since verses 22-23 describe how not to worship YHWH, verses 24-26 describe how to worship YHWH. While they should not make an image of YHWH what they should do is **make an altar for YHWH**. The **altar** should be made **of simple earth** and not precious, ornately carved stones, such as were used in pagan altars. The sacrifices of **sheep and oxen** were used for **burnt and peace offerings** and were for the Israelites because of their sinfulness. These rules regarding the altar and sacrifices are simple and easy to understand so that they could approach God safely.

Such **altars of earth** are to be constructed wherever God determines, no matter the place. This is the same way God dealt with the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When some event occurred God instructed them to build an altar in remembrance of the name of YHWH and what He had done (e.g. Gen. 8:20; 12:7f; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). If they followed this simple form of

worship He would **come to** them (further revelation) **and bless** them (say good things about them).

Verse 25, **‘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.** When they come into the land of Israel and to Jerusalem they will find that there is a lot of stone. Thus, if they wish to make an altar of stone then the stone should not be ornately cut with tools. No hewn stone should be used or else it would profane the altar. Rather they should use stones they pick up from the earth in their natural state.

Verse 26, **‘And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.’** No **steps** should lead up to God’s **altar**, like the Canaanite altar found at Tel Megiddo. God’s altar should be distinct from pagan altars. The purpose of no steps **is so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.** Man first realized he was naked after the Fall (Gen 3:7ff). God covered human nakedness with garments of skin (Gen 3:21). Thus, those who carry out priestly activity on God’s altar should wear garments in order to cover their sinfulness (Exod 28:42).ⁱⁱ This would remind them of God’s gracious act of providing garments to cover human sinfulness.

PRINCIPLE: Every time we put on clothes to cover our nakedness we should remember how Jesus Christ graciously clothes us with His righteousness to cover our sinfulness.

In summary, the people feared God in the wrong sense. Moses encouraged them to fear God in the proper sense; to have a reverential awe and respect for His character. Seeing the visible manifestation of God in the Shechinah Glory would develop this fear and keep them from sinning.

The ‘Book of the Covenant’ is proposed beginning in 20:22 with the prohibition of idolatry and ending in 23:33 with the prohibition of idolatry. No image was to be made of the invisible God. If they would obey the commandments in this ‘Book’ it would guard them against idolatry. If they disobeyed it would lead them to idolatry. Sin always leads to idolatry.

Rather than making idols of Him they should make simple earthen altars for Him. The priests should offer sin offerings on the altar. They should do so fully clothed and not naked so as to symbolize the covering of their sinfulness (20:22-26).

ⁱ Sailhammer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 288.

ii The priests of Sumeria used to perform ritual ceremonies in a state of nakedness. The priests of Israel should not be like the Sumerian's. They should cover their sinful nakedness with garments.

[Back To The Top](#)

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