

Love Before Law Exodus 20:1–2

This past week, a very specific scene was stirred in me from 25 years ago. I'm sure that many of you will resonate with it. A newborn baby cries in the middle of the night. An exhausted and sleepy mother climbs out of the warmth and comfort to address the problem, which in most cases was the ravenous appetite of my son. And, at least for the first few days, in the newness of it all, I rise as well. Many nights, our boy's protest pierced the midnight peace. He has a need impossible for him to articulate, but, as the lack of quiet indicates, is nonetheless real. The instincts of his champion of a mother take over. She knows precisely what will help to bring down the clamor and meet the moment sufficiently. In that nursery long ago, I witnessed the many ingredients of a selfless life that have endured to this day.

However, one thing I failed to witness in the noisy joy of those initial weeks was clear, firm, and loving instruction. Now, that would eventually come. Life would have been even more chaotic without necessary and simple directives. Yet, the first and foundational reality, indeed the crucial need from mother to infant was not statutes, but service bathed in a measureless affection. It was love felt and love demonstrated. Not based on anything our son had done, time and again, his life was sustained by a loving heart with capable hands.

We could rightly say that most of the details up to this point in Exodus are related to the forced service of Israel to a pagan ruler. But this morning we've come to chapter twenty, which begins to spell out what proper service to the true God looks like.¹ And what God reminds Moses and all of Israel in verse 2 of today's text is His fatherly care and power; a gracious work which would bring them under and continually mark this covenant rule. Verse 2 serves as the necessary and fundamental truth which must stay with them as they begin to live inside their calling to be a "*holy nation*."²

Further, as *we* consider some of the most memorable words of Scripture, the truth of verse 2 must be in *our* hearts and on *our* lips as well if we are to live well for God's honor. In fact, as a slight nod to school starting back, the visual I want us to fix in our minds this morning is a *backpack*. If the commands of this covenant are to be kept with diligence, then the contents of verse 2 must be the supplies that can't be left behind for life's journey. It was true under this covenant in Exodus, and it's true of our own walks in Memphis³ as we live under a superior covenant.⁴

I. God speaks

It would be hard to argue against this being one of the most recognizable speeches in the history of our world. That being said, we could reasonably claim that what is contained in the first half of Exodus 20 suffers from a public relations problem. Here at the front end of the 21st century we proudly sport our own default, moral code.⁵ It's part of our fallen DNA to do what is right in our

¹ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 438-439.

² Exodus 19:6

³ Whether "ten feet off of Beale" or ten miles—irrelevant.

⁴ Hebrews 12:22-24, "*But you have come...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...*"

⁵ For two examples, "Every person has the right to control their [own] body," and "God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life." The complete list, based on a 2014 article entitled, "*Behold, Atheists' New Ten Commandments*," as quoted by Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 12.

own eyes and to bristle at being told how to live. God knew this of Israel and He knows this of all who have come after. And what we'll discover over the next few weeks is that a relationship with this God is marked by hearing Him and conforming one's life to what He requires.

The more recent dichotomous notion that "Christianity is not about rules but of relationships" doesn't exactly square with either testament of the Bible. We can appreciate the emphasis of vertical and horizontal love. Yet, Scripture is more than clear that our relationships with God and each other are *enabled* and are intended to *flourish* when the moral boundaries set by this God who speaks are followed. There is a refuge when we fail, yes, but there are also provisions for the effort.⁶

Verses 3-17 here in Exodus 20 are known as the *Decalogue*, meaning "ten words." They were given to unveil an ocean of truth from heaven itself; truths about God, about us, about our fellow man. In operation, they expose the hidden places of the human heart, protect us from self-destruction, and function to eventually escort us to its perfect Keeper. These commandments have never fallen out of relevancy and were intended to further God's glory in the world. They were given for the good of humanity as both a messenger of moral inability and as a standard for moral conformity. And that paradox of inability and conformity comes to light only as we come to harmonize the terms and stipulations of this Mosaic covenant with the terms of a final, better covenant.

God had already set Israel apart as "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"⁷ And now God Himself would distinguish not simply by telling them who they are, but by expressing to them how they are to live as people devoted to Him.

What begins to happen is what God said would happen. Exodus 19:9, "*And the LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.'*" It's the promised third day and so it begins: **[1] And God spoke all these words...** Up to this point, the mediation of Moses was required, but not here. Israel heard directly and audibly the voice of God. As described in last week's text, the sounds and sights were already on a level that made Israel rightly tremble. Fire and smoke not controlled by humans, and the ground shaking underneath all present were realities enough. But now, without seeing the source of God's form, His words were made intelligible to the whole nation, from Moses to maidservant, leaving no doubt that God was present in this unique moment of Israel's history.⁸

Moses, repeating these commands and reflecting on some exact details, writes in Deuteronomy 5, "*These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.*" This was no gentle whisper. But the decibel level of the speaker is less important than who is speaking. God speaks. And what He begins to speak in verse 2 is typically understood as the *prologue* of the Ten Words. Last week in discipleship hour we discussed John's prologues in both his Gospel and his first letter. There it was stated that, as prologues go, they function to either set up what's to come, to establish priorities, or to set a

⁶ 1 John 2:1 reflects both help (the Word) and refuge (Christ's advocacy)! "*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*"

⁷ Exodus 19:6

⁸ Stuart, 446.

specific trajectory. And maybe there is a bit of each of these functions at work here. There is a priority, something to be kept in mind. There is a trajectory, going in a direction which will establish an important pattern ahead.

II. (God speaks) To *His* people

God begins by stating, ***I am the LORD your God.*** They belong to Him. His people are His prized possession. He loves them with an everlasting love. And His people belong to Him in a fundamental sense because He is the Giver and Sustainer of every life at the foot of Sinai.

In covenant-making arrangements during these days of Israel, a king making a covenant with a prospective vassal would clearly establish his identity. Moreover, he would also outline what good things he had done for the vassal, promises of future protection, and so on. On those bases he would demand exclusive loyalty, spelling out obligations for those now under his new rulership.⁹ In other words, God didn't establish a structural pattern of covenant making so unfamiliar as to be unrecognizable. When we see the LORD here declaring His status followed by a declaration of the mercy, Israel would have understood what was taking place here. A covenant was being established.

Again, these covenant commands were spoken aloud to a particular people. Yet, God self-identifies. He's the only Being who can truly do that. The rich formula of ***I am*** coupled with the name ***LORD*** says it all. The self-existent, all-determining Sovereign spoke His exalted status into each ear and over all the nation to hear.¹⁰ We've said similar things, but an argument can be made that the whole book of Exodus is one long explanation of God's name, unfolded in the rescue from slavery, the giving of the law, and the details of the tabernacle.¹¹ It's no surprise then that here at the start of the Ten Commandments, God intends to make clear His exalted authority. And, fascinatingly, coming as no surprise to those who have repented and believed on Jesus, one of His most meaningful commands He gave is prefaced in the same way, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*"¹² The LORD speaks and makes Himself known in Exodus and Matthew.

All that God had revealed about Himself led to this moment of instruction in Exodus 20. Thomas Watson stated, "He who gives men their lives, has most right to give them their laws."¹³ But there was more than one reason for obeying what was to follow.

III. (God speaks to His people) Whom He has freed

I'm currently a fourth of the way through John Paton's autobiography of his life as a missionary to the New Hebrides, a chain of islands about a thousand miles off the east coast of Australia.¹⁴ In the mid-1800s, Paton and his wife landed on one of the many islands where cannibalism was practiced. At one point in his efforts to protect the islander women, Paton challenged several chiefs

⁹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, 153.

¹⁰ Ernest Reisinger, *Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments*, 2.

¹¹ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 35.

¹² Matthew 28:18-19

¹³ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 12.

¹⁴ Today it is named Vanuatu.

to take a stand against men abusing their wives [or worse]. In one exchange with a chief who disagreed with this new proposal, the chief stated, “If we did not beat our women, they would never work; they would not fear and obey us; but when we have beaten, and slayed, and [I’ll let you deduce the last appalling practice in that process], the rest [of the women] are all very quiet and good for a long time to come!” Fearmongering has always had its sure successes. But Paton knew the better way. He responded, “I tried to show [this chief] how cruel it was, besides [rendering the wives] unable to work, kindness would have a much better effect.”¹⁵

To be candid, I wrestled with this idea all week long. From one angle, this very chapter will tell us of Israel’s trembling fear at the sights and sounds they heard.¹⁶ But then I thought about the depth of kindness conveyed in the words, “***I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.***” The memories of God making a distinction between Israel and Egypt: no flies for Israel, no dead livestock, no destructive hail, no debilitating darkness. Then, just simply place lamb’s blood on the doorpost, and my son will live? I’m running to the nearest sheep stall with joy and a knife! The wall of water standing, as they marched across dry ground; and then the wall of water falling, as they witnessed their enemy army swept away to their end. On one hand I want to say, “Who wouldn’t be frightened under the smoky shadow of Sinai?” But on the other hand, might we fairly ask, in Paton-like fashion, “Was not God highlighting His layered kindnesses of delivering Israel from a despot and a dungeon intended to have a better effect?” For the moment, maybe it was too much for Israel to take in. But long term, in terms of God’s self-disclosure and placing these words, at this juncture, before the commandments, spoken aloud by the God of the universe—they were intended to have great effect upon all of God’s people for all time. We’re to see that the positioning of this truth, right here, just before these instructions of renown, says much about God desiring His grace to be an anchor for all seasons of life.

I could have offered a fourth point—God speaks, to His people, whom He has freed, *so that they might reflect His holiness*. But that will be the thrust of the next several weeks. What’s true is that in Israel’s obedience to the law, she will represent the LORD, thereby reflecting His holy character to one another and to the nations.¹⁷

Conclusion

As we saw last week, God is holy. As those beings in closest proximity to Him say on repeat, He is thoroughly and majestically so.¹⁸ And as such, God intended that His holiness be shared with a people whom He cared for with a fatherly love.¹⁹ He rescued from certain death, and now Israel needed to know how to live and what it would take to create a community wherein that merciful rescue, and gratitude for it, show up in worship and service.

While hiking through the Decalogue and the various case laws in chapters 21-23 over the next several weeks, there will be temptations to veer off course. The heart might think from one angle, “I can’t live up to these things! As long as I have grace, that’s enough.” Or it might conclude,

¹⁵ John Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography*, 97. Also, since this is not my first read through of Paton’s work, the message of Paton and his life in step with the gospel would have a profound effect upon that archipelago and those awful practices for subsequent decades.

¹⁶ Exodus 20:19, “...do not let God speak to us, lest we die!”

¹⁷ Blackburn, 114.

¹⁸ Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8

¹⁹ Hebrews 12:9–10, “*Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.*”

“Look at all I’ve done for God’s glory. There aren’t many servants like me around.”²⁰ This preamble identifying the Giver of the covenant and the prologue identifying the recipients of the covenant—they aren’t merely starting points headed into the Ten Commandments. They are necessary guardrails that for centuries have served to remind God’s people that it was and will always be association before adjustments. Heart intent before hard content. Grace before grit. Mercy before modification. Rescue before renewal. Kindness before keeping. Sympathy before stipulations. Connection before correction. Love before Law. Compassion before command. Relationship before rules. Indicative before imperative. Done before do. Gospel before guidelines. This is the worn path of obedience dampened by tears of gratitude; the path of righteousness for His name’s sake.²¹

But we’re not to mistake this *before and after* as two polar points of emphasis. They indeed belong together, one with the other. The order is of grave importance, but so is the ongoing relationship. Grit is *enabled* by the grace. Correction lands squarer when there’s connection. Command-keeping grows best in the soil of conquering kindness.

South Woods, we have every responsibility to not get lost in the woods of the law of Moses. In fact, the Spirit through the apostle Peter echoes a similar framework to help believers keep their bearings. From the passage we read earlier he writes, “*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct...*”²² And what does Peter pinpoint as the nourishing substance for living a holy life a couple of verses down? “*...Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*” To keep our footing of obedience we must “backpack” our redemption throughout the time of our exile. All of us, irrespective of a host of realities about us, are tempted to believe that the way we are redeemed/forgiven/justified is by adherence to commands—doing the right things and not doing the *really* wrong things. So, we must never stop admiring and clinging to the grace of God in Christ!

Are you living in the freedom of this ransom paid for you by the precious blood of Christ? When Jesus is embraced by faith, He turns cowering fear into joyful faithfulness.

For those who have believed, it’s gospel *before* guidelines; but it’s never one without the other.²³ Might we approach the Ten Words with our deliverance in tow. The truth of rescue will nourish us along the way and help us keep our spiritual bearings. Might we come to these Ten Words with our Deliverer, Jesus Christ, in view,²⁴ astounded by His obedience displayed in His spotless life and in His death in our place. As long as we build our lives on Golgotha, we can safely visit Sinai with Spirit-given joy, made willing and able to be holy, as God is holy.²⁵

²⁰ “The Church on earth has always, as it were, to walk on razor’s edge between legalism and antinomianism [meaning anti-law, in this case God’s law], between taking the law too serious and not taking it seriously enough. It is not surprising that every Church tends to err in one direction or the other.” (Alec Vidler, *Christ’s Strange Work*, 53. As quoted by Alistair Begg, *Pathway to Freedom*, 27.)

²¹ Psalm 23:3

²² 1 Peter 1:14-15

²³ Guidelines without the gospel leads to bondage and despair. Gospel without the guidelines leads to presumption and moral laxity.

²⁴ Hebrews 12:1–2, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

²⁵ Psalm 110:3, “*Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments...*”

