Sinai and Sacrifice
Exodus 20:18–26
November 8, 2026

As I think I've mentioned, slowing down to consider the Ten Commandments—one at a time—was a decision I wrestled with for a long time. Having just completed that *last* week, I'm glad we did it. As I've said, it *might* be the most applicable section of Scripture I've ever taught. So, what would've been my hesitation? Do I not *like* the Ten Commandments?

Some of the danger is this: zooming in *so* much on a single verse or two—week after week—can lead us to lose sight of the context. That doesn't mean there *aren't* things that can be done to mitigate that.[1] I certainly hope we emphasized the context of the *whole* Bible by connecting the Ten Words to the teaching of Christ and the power of the Spirit. But losing context *is* a danger when you consider a single verse.

Having said that, with Exodus 20 the pros outweigh the cons. If we could go back, I'd do it again. However, *if* we went back, I think I'd say *this* every Sunday. Before *each* command was read, I'd say something along these lines: "Don't forget where *we* are in the book. Also: don't forget *where* these Israelites *were*. For generation upon generation they'd been enslaved in Egypt. But finally, don't forget where they are *now*—delivered, but standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai." In short, don't forget where *we* are. Don't forget where they *were*. Don't forget where they *are*.

We considered that setting in chapter 19. Today we'll see that the setting hasn't really changed. So, to be even *more* specific, maybe I should've said *this* every week, "As you hear this command—You shall not steal, You shall not murder, etc.—you should hear it with thunder crashing around you and lightning flashing above you, a mountain smoking in front of you, and Yahweh—the One speaking the command—certainly not whispering it to you."

For ten weeks or so, we zoomed *in*. We did so to see things we *wouldn't* see otherwise. But today, we zoom back out.

1. **At Sinai, God speaks to Israel** (vv. 18–19)

First, let's consider Sinai once again. We did so back in chapter 19, *before* the commands, when we read this: **Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder** (Ex. 19:18–19).

That's Exodus 19:18. Now hear Exodus 20:18: **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.** So, before the commands, *that's* what they see and hear. *After* the commands, that's what they see and hear. Which means, almost certainly, *during* the commands that's what they're seeing and hearing.[2]

So, whether or not we've kept that in mind, this quaking Sinai—smoking like a furnace—is the scene and setting of the Ten Commands. At the foot of that mountain, senses overwhelmed, Israel hears the voice of God. Verse 22 says: **You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven.**

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[1] That's *some* of the reason we did the summer on Psalms of the Exodus. We wanted to reiterate—over and over again—that the Law came to a people who'd been delivered. And out of that deliverance came doxology.
[2] Desmond Alexander, *Exodus,* AOTC, 435; Phil Ryken, *Exodus,* PTW, 678.

What they *see* overwhelms. So does what they *hear*.[3] In fact, in Hebrews 12—which we'll come back to—we read that *this* sound was such that those who heard it begged that it would cease (Heb. 12:19). The Ten Commandments were *not* whispered.

Later on, in the book of Deuteronomy, *after* the commands are reiterated, Moses reflects on what happened, saying this to Israel: **When you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. You said, "Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; . . . this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?"** (Deut. 5:23–26).

That's the longer explanation. But verse 19 in our text is the short version. **Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."** Israel heard Yahweh speak. Trembling, and standing at a distance (20:18), they ask that Moses serve as something of a go–between.

Of course, they weren't *wrong* to ask this. Luther wrote this: "He who merely studies the commandments of God is not greatly moved. But he who listens to God commanding, how can he fail to be terrified by majesty so great?"[4]

They ask for a mediator, *rightly*. And God gives them one. In fact, He'd *already* given them one.

2. **At Sinai, God speaks to Israel through Moses** (vv. 20–23)

Verse 20: **Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid."**

Now, to be clear, Moses is *not* an angel. Yet this scene does remind me of the birth narratives in the Gospels. Zacharias was like this. Something happens that brings about fear. The angel tells him not to be afraid (Lk. 1:12–13). A few verses later, an angel tells Mary the same thing: **Do not be afraid** (Lk. 1:30). And then, in the next chapter, shepherds are out in a field. The glory of the Lord shone around them; **and they were terribly frightened** (Lk. 2:9). What does the messenger of the Lord say to them? **Do not be afraid** (Lk. 2:10).

The point is this: when God reveals Himself, and in particular when He reveals aspects of His glory, we—a humanity that *thinks* we grasp it—we rightly tremble. And yet, what has God's posture been, over and over again, for His people? He sends a messenger. And gives a message: **Do not be afraid** (Ex. 20:20).

The one speaking on behalf of God tells those fearful *not* to fear. And, not unlike the Gospels, he then tells them *why*. In this case, he actually gives them two reasons. As verse 20 goes on, we read the first one: **Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you."**

We considered this "testing" during the wilderness wanderings—at Marah, at Massah, and at Meribah. But as we said then, this testing is not *only* some sort of pass/fail exam. That's part of it, of course. But His tests weren't simply to find out what it was in their hearts. They were *also* intended to instruct. For example, in the wilderness He led them to a place with no water so that, *there,* He might provide it for them. Instead of *reacting* to their need, He actually orchestrated it. And therefore,

[3] When God speaks audibly in the Scriptures, the sound is often described as deafeningly loud. Doug Stuart, *Exodus,* NAC, 468.

[4] Quoted in Alexander, 436.

He wasn't *merely* showing them who *they* were, He was showing them who *He* was. He tests in order to train in order to teach.[5] So that they might trust.

That's also some of what is happening here. God reveals Himself—as glorious, as holy, as majestic—which teaches and trains their hearts. In fact, that's the second reason Moses tells them they ought *not* be afraid. Verse 20 again: **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.**

I trust you hear the fascinating juxtaposition. That is, Moses says—in essence—do not be afraid, God has done this for a purpose; and that purpose is that you might fear Him—and that this fear might *remain* with you. So, of course, don't be afraid.

The obvious tension in that verse tells us, quite plainly, that there is a fear that's improper and a fear of the Lord that is absolutely imperative. The balance of the Old Testament speaks to this *latter* kind of fear, the kind that is the very **beginning of wisdom** (Prov. 1:7). The Israelites weren't wrong to see what they saw at Sinai, to hear what they heard, and tremble at ineffable majesty and holiness. There is a proper response to seeing the glory of God.

Seen rightly, no approach is haphazard. Nor would we dictate the terms of drawing near.

Which is actually one of the primary themes of this book. Exodus isn't *simply* a book describing who God is—holy, majestic and glorious. It's a book that presents God in all His holiness at the very heart of His people's lives.[6] In fact, one of the central questions Exodus seeks to answer is this: How can a holy God dwell in the midst of an unholy people?

There's a reason back in Exodus 19 God tells them not to touch the mountain. Because a holy God is not safe for a sinful people. In fact, God limited access—even clouding His glory—in mercy.

So, as we go forward in Exodus, it will be a lot of "this far, and no farther." With priests, tabernacles, sacrifices, and meticulous instruction, the Hebrews will learn what it means to be blessed with the presence of God, and yet still breathe.

But that story is still unfolding. Point three will advance it a good bit. But even at this point we see they dare not draw near. They *must* have a mediator. Verse 21: **So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.**

To me, nothing communicates mediation between God and man like this section of Scripture. This is likely Moses's *fourth* ascent.[7] He's gone up; and he's come back down—ascended and descended repeatedly. Here, once again, in contrast to the people, Moses draws near—to hear from God.

The Ten Words we've considered they heard audibly. But no longer will the people hear God speak. Instead, God will speak to His people *through* Moses.[8]

I told someone this week what I said at the beginning. That I wished I'd re–emphasized the scene a little more each week—the thunder, lightning, and trumpets. This person didn't disagree with me, but did say this: "You could've done that, of course. But the commands themselves are weighty and sobering."

And that's actually where our text goes. Verse 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.'"** That's what had *just* happened. The LORD spoke the Ten Words. Israel heard Him. And speaking of those words, through Moses Yahweh will reiterate them. Verse 23: **You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves.**

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[5] Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known,* 68.
[6] Motyer, 10.
[7] Motyer, 229fn.
[8] And this scene will *continue* for the next few chapters. Until 24:3, according to Motyer, 230.

It's not word-for-word, but it is—in essence—the first two commands repeated. Maybe those two are repeated because, as we've seen, every *other* command is linked to a failure to keep the first two. Or maybe the first two function as something of a title for the entire list. Either way, God speaks the commands to Israel first. And then, through Moses, He repeats them.

They were to worship Yahweh alone. That's the first command. But the second means He determines how we're to think about Him. That is, though God was revealed in fuller measure at Sinai, when He descended, He did so within a cloud. That's part of the reason they were *not* to attempt to make some image of Him. Any attempt to portray Him *visibly* would be to claim to know something that God Himself hid.

They were to worship God alone, and certainly not some lesser version of Him. And should Israel see Him rightly, as He'd revealed Himself, nothing else was to attract their lives, hearts, and minds. The commands had made clear that He demanded, not *aspects* of their lives, but every aspect of themselves.

Which is another part of verse 20 we didn't mention yet. Moses told them that this *fear* of God was to **remain with you, so that you may not sin.** Whatever a proper fear of God is, it brings *this* about. In the end, it's *not* a "stay away from me" posture toward *Him*, but a "stay away from that which displeases Him."

It's hard to read these commands reiterated, even with the *focus* on gods of silver or gold, and *not* think of a shining calf just a few chapters ahead.

At Sinai, God spoke to Israel. And then He spoke to Israel *through* Moses.

First, He told Israel—negatively—what they were *not* to do.

But then He told them something, positively, they were to *certainly* do.

3. **At Sinai, through Moses, God tells Israel how they might approach Him.**

Hear the "You shall not" of verse 23. And *then* hear the "You shall" of verse 24: **You shall make an altar of earth for Me.** First, let's consider this altar—and in particular, the altar's simplicity. It's described initially as "an altar of earth." Then in verses 25–26 we get *more* instruction, as well as more detail. 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.**

To grasp the significance of this, it might be worth considering how *other* lower–case gods in the Ancient Near East were worshipped. Often, *those* deities were believed to manifest themselves *through* their images.[9] That was certainly the case with the gods of Egypt. However, for the Israelites, that was *not* to be so. The second command prohibited it. That command's repetition in our passage reiterates it: **no gods of silver or gods of gold** (v. 23). A simple stone at the altar—one not cut, but somewhat crudely fit together—emphasized the contrast even more.[10] The Hebrews worshipped Yahweh, not something they fashioned—even an altar.

But what is this altar for? The question *hinted* at in point two remains: how might an unholy people approach, or draw near to, a holy God—the God revealed at Sinai. Verse 24 goes on: **You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings.**

This is *not* the first time a burnt offering has been mentioned in the Scriptures. Genesis 8 speaks of one. So did Exodus 18. Leviticus will describe these sacrifices in *more* detail, of course. The burnt offering was—in essence—a sacrifice of atonement. The worshipper would put their hands on the animal as symbolic identification. Then the animal was sacrificed in the sinner's place, its blood

[9] Alexander, 456.
[10] Stuart, 472.

sprinkled on the side of the altar. Then the *entire* animal was burned completely.[11] That's why it was called the burnt offering. Other than the hide, nothing was left over. The smoke from the burnt offering would, of course, rise to the heavens.[12] And the entire thing pictured atonement. This kind of offering had been around for a while.

However, in the Scriptures, this *is* the first mention of the peace offering.[13] The peace offering was done differently than the burnt offering. First, it wouldn't be consumed entirely by the fire. Only the fat from the animal was burned up. The rest of the animal, however, was cooked so that it might be enjoyed by the worshippers.[14]

Why? Because *this* sacrifice wasn't only done differently. It pictured something altogether different. It was also called a fellowship offering. It pictured peace. Peace brought about through sacrifice.

Hear what verse 24 goes on to say: **In every place where I cause My name to be remembered.** Throughout Exodus we've considered the name of the LORD. Yahweh's made His name known—both in His deeds and through His words. And here at Sinai He's continuing to do so. In fact, He *causes* His name to be remembered.

And what happens in those places where He *causes* His name to be remembered? Verse 24: **In every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.**

Back in verse 21, Moses approaches God while the people remain at a distance.

And yet in verse 24, God approaches His people so that He might bless them.

Conclusion

Yahweh spoke to His people at Sinai, with lightning and thunder and volume and glory.

And in the New Covenant, He *continues* to speak, even continuing to answer the question we've considered: "How can a holy God dwell in the midst of an unholy people? How might an unholy people approach, or draw near to, a God like this?"

Again, it's *through* a Mediator (we dare not approach otherwise), but we do so through a better One—not God through Moses, but God made Man. And we approach through *Him* because He offered a better sacrifice on our behalf, an offering that would *not* need to be repeated over and over. Instead, He offered up *Himself*—once for all—making full atonement and bringing about peace *between* God and man.

Though God spoke many times, and in many ways, He's spoken now *in* and *through* His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). That same book eventually says this: **See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking** (Heb. 12:25). Instead, we're to **show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire** (Heb. 12:28-29). That means, in part, He's not *ceased* being who He was at Sinai. It's just that we've been brought to a different mountain, and to **the Mediator of a New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better** (Heb. 12:24).

At Sinai, they heard His voice and drew back.

In Christ, we need not be afraid. We hear God and draw near.

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[11] Ryken, 694.
[12] Ryken, 694.
[13] Alexander, 459.
[14] Ryken, 695. Some portions were given to the priests.