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Israel's First Steps in the Light of Holy Fire: The Book of Exodus / Exodus 20:1–17

Session Two

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The Law is a shadow of the heavenly realities now revealed and experienced in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:1). The study of the Ten Commandments is relevant to Christians, since they are part of the shadow anticipating the truth in Jesus.

The Ten Commandments function in a special way. They function as a model for how Israel can become God's "holy" people (Ex 19:5-6). In other words, Israel must learn to imitate the one God who is holy. The Ten Commandments provides a simple outline of core principles to help them on that path.

The unique role the Ten Commandments play in constituting Israel as God's own, holy people is also indicated by the fact the God spoke these commandments to Israel directly (Deut 4:12-13).

Therefore, this study of the Ten Commandments considers how these are a shadow of truth known more fully in Jesus. What we find will be helpful to guide us in knowing how we, too, can move forward in the path of learning to imitate the holy God.

The First Commandment

> **Exodus 20:3** ESV
> "You shall have no other gods before me.

Belief in many gods was common in Egypt, where Israel had been living

for hundreds of years. It was common in Canaan, the land to which God was taking them. This commandment means that only Yahweh is to be worshipped as Israel's God.

This commandment continues to be relevant for Christians, as we can see from 1 Corinthians 8:4-6:

> **1 Corinthians 8:4–6** ESV
> Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"— yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Notice that Paul affirms there is only one who is God. So, the many others that humans want to think of as "gods" or "lords" are not actually divine. Only Yahweh is divine (Deut 4:39).

Yet, also notice that Paul acknowledges the reality of pretend "gods" and "lords," writing that there are "many" of these. Paul is referring to what we commonly know as angels and demons (we won't get into the technicalities of these terms here). The New Testament shows us that intelligent, heavenly persons really exist and somehow have an influence on what we experience in the visible, earthly sphere of creation. Notice the following from Paul:

> **Colossians 1:16** ESV
> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

> **Ephesians 6:12** ESV
> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

It is these superhuman creatures who deceive humans into worshiping them as gods. We have a clear case of this in Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Satan tempts Jesus to worship him, which just means that Satan wants Jesus to recognize Satan as his god:

> **Matthew 4:8–11** ESV
> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ ” Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Those “rulers and authorities,” etc. have not ceased their deceptions. In many places of the world today people continue to worship “gods” other than the one, living God. In spiritually skeptical cultures like the modern United States of America, those spiritual forces of darkness stand behind money, pleasure, civil government, or other things that Americans are tempted to make the center of their pursuit of happiness.

In that regard, then, even the “shadow” provided by the First Commandment remains valid for Christians. Yet, the reality the shadow represents is also evident in what Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

> **1 Corinthians 8:6** ESV
> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The key terms, “God” and “Lord” are terms used to identify the one, living God in the Old Testament. Notice that in this verse these terms are used to refer to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. This implies that Jesus is equal to God the Father.

Further, both are credited with the work of creation and with the ongoing existence of creation.

Therefore, the reality of which the Old Testament is a shadow is that the one, living God exists as God the Father, God the Son (who became flesh in the person Jesus of Nazareth), and God the Holy Spirit (see Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2).

This means that Christians obey the First Commandment by believing in all three persons of the one God.

The Second Commandment

> **Exodus 20:4–6** ESV
> "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Assuming that Israel is keeping the first commandment, God here instructs them not to try to think of any physical thing as representing God visually. The meaning of this commandment is illustrated by Israel's blatant disobedience of it while God is giving Moses the rest of the statutes of the Law.

> **Exodus 32:1–6** ESV
> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

They could no longer see Moses, their leader, and their sense of security was shaken. They wanted something they could look at to be able to feel that they were being taken care of. The golden calf Aaron makes for them is therefore said to be "your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!"

They were not saying that some “gods” other than Yahweh brought them up from Egypt. Apparently, they meant for the calf statue to represent Yahweh. In the Old Testament the word translated by “God” in English is the Hebrew word *elohim*. It is a plural noun, meaning “heavenly ones” or similar renderings. So, “gods” is one way of reading *elohim*.

The reason God prohibited the making of images to represent him is because he only revealed himself by speaking to Israel.

> **Deuteronomy 4:12** ESV
> Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.

So, the making of visual representations of God of any kind is forbidden (Deut 4:15-31).

How does this shadow point us to the reality in Jesus Christ?

The fullest revelation of God that has ever been given is found in the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

> **John 1:18** ESV
> No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

If Israel was forbidden to represent God with any images because he revealed himself only through his voice, then wouldn’t the same logic mean that Christians can make images of Jesus — the visible revelation of God?

That seems reasonable, yet there are no artifacts from the time of Jesus providing an image of his physical appearance. We don’t have any statues made of him or drawings or even written descriptions.

Yet, it is Jesus who is the perfect image of God.

> **Colossians 1:15** ESV
> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

> **Hebrews 1:3** ESV
> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

Clearly, it was not Jesus' physical appearance that provides an image of God. It was his character (so, in the passage from Hebrews, "the exact imprint of [God's] nature").

In other words, Jesus is God living a human existence. Therefore, Jesus is the human whose character perfectly imitates — in human ways — the divine character of the one, living God. This was what humankind as such was created to be:

> **Genesis 1:26** ESV
> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Because of sin, the image of God in human beings is distorted, corrupted. In Christ, we have information and spiritual power to be transformed from a corrupted image into a true image of God.

> **Ephesians 4:20–24** ESV
> But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

> **2 Peter 1:3–11** ESV
> His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed

> from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Second Commandment as a shadow merely teaches us not to try to represent God with images we can make or by picking something in nature to represent him. The reality of the Second Commandment is that God is himself making human beings to represent him on the earth — to be his true image.

Conclusion

Taking our cue from Hebrews 10:1, we have begun considering the Ten Commandments as somehow a shadow of the full truth found in Jesus Christ. So far, we have studied the first two commandments. The commandment to only worship the one, true God corresponds to the truth known through Jesus that the one God is three persons: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The commandment not to make our own images of God is ultimately because, in Jesus, God is making humans to be the image of himself that he originally created us to be.