

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:18-26

To understand more about the importance of proper worship.

Read the Text:

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and 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. If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.' (Exodus 20:18-26, ESV)

Study the Text:

Chapter 20 continues with a description of what happened around Mount Sinai when the Lord descended on it, very similar to Exodus 19:16. Moses tells the people how to have the proper view of God in the midst of their fear, followed by the Lord telling Moses to emphasize His commandments to the people. Below is a breakdown of some of the keywords and phrases in this passage.

TO FEAR OR NOT TO FEAR

"Fear the Lord" is a phrase/idea/command found throughout the entire Bible, but perhaps most notably in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs 9:10 says: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Because of that, it's not uncommon for churches to sing songs that center on this idea (e.g., "Taste and See" by Shane & Shane, based on Psalm 34, "Oh, fear the Lord, Oh, all you saints, He'll give you everything."). But here, in Exodus 20, Moses is saying the opposite: "Do not fear" (Ex. 20:20). So an important distinction needs to be made: *the context of fear matters*. Here, the fear described is the physical by-product of the presence of God. The people saw thunder, the flashes of lightning, and the sound of the trumpet, and as a result, they requested that God *not speak* to them. The people were afraid for their lives in the presence of the LORD. But, while the dead do not continue to sin, the dead do not praise the LORD either (Psalm 115:17).

PROPER VIEW OF GOD

So, why is God presenting Himself with "the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking" (Ex. 20:18)? As Romans 3:20 says, "Through the law comes knowledge of sin." The people needed to understand what was off-limits as the chosen people of God. But more than that, they needed to understand why the Lord was commanding them to hold to such a law. The text continues with the answer: "The fear of the Lord is before the people so that they may not sin" (Ex.20:20). The purpose of the fear they were to have was to enable them to see God for who He is. God can issue commandments and demand obedience because He is a God who is to be feared more than any of the groups of people that Israel will encounter after they cross the Jordan, as well as the gods they worshipped.

THIS PRESENT DARKNESS

Verse 21 continues: “The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.” Most of Scripture describes darkness as something to be avoided. Much of the New Testament even compares darkness to sin (1 Jn. 5-7). However, notice that in this passage, God is not only in the storm and the smoke but even the darkness. In other words, God is everywhere. This is known as the doctrine of omnipresence. It’s the truth that led the Psalmist to declare: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there... If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.” (Psalm 139). So, while the people feared the thick darkness, Moses drew near to it because he knew that God was present in the midst of it.

LET ME REPEAT MYSELF

The LORD tells Moses to say to the people in verse 23: “You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.” In prior studies, we have seen Moses repeat certain first few lines (incipit) of something but emphasize the whole without repeating the entirety of it (e.g., Miriam singing the first line of the song of Moses in Ex. 15:21). This almost a restating of both the first and second commandments, combined into one. It isn’t simply that they should have no other gods before the LORD, but the emphasis against idols is important too, which foreshadows what the people will do soon after this: bring forth Egyptian gold to be melted and made into a statue for worship (Ex. 32). It is possible that God is emphasizing a commandment here that He knows the people will soon break.

PROPER WORSHIP

Worshiping God properly is important. While the creation of a gold or silver idol to visualize the LORD that they wanted to worship was prohibited, God still knew the people would want to worship him. He, therefore, outlines a few types of altars that must be set up properly in order to convey acceptable worship. As Stuart Douglas writes: “Altars were necessary for sacrifices, which were in turn necessary for worship. At this early point in the covenant, God gave the Israelites a brief overview of altar construction in anticipation of their need to worship him properly. Now that they had entered a covenant with God, it was important that they be able to respond fully to him in worship, not merely repeating the practices of the past or simply borrowing from pagans the concepts and procedures of worship and sacrifice.”¹ At this time, the altars were not intricate but were actually very basic. In the future, the people would create a tent and then the temple; at this point, the people needed a very simple design to quickly be able to sacrifice for their guilt associated with breaking the newly given Ten Commandments so that their sin could be transferred to an animal. Therefore, God provided an altar of dirt and, if they were so pleased, an option of stone as well. It’s interesting to note the specific prohibition against exposing nakedness on the altar, as well. God demands not only worship, but proper worship.

MY NAME TO BE REMEMBERED

Verse 24 continues: “In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.” This was a promise not just to the hearers of Moses but to many following generations. This was a promise for the generation that wanders. It was a promise to the generation taken to Babylon in exile, as well as the generation that returned. God, knowing all of the places towards which He would drive his chosen people, confirmed in this line that He will always come to them and bless them. However, He will not do it for their name but for His name to be remembered. True worship is not about the people or the blessing but about God and his name (Ps. 115:1).

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 471.

What About Now?

One takeaway from this passage is that the proper fear of God leads to the proper worship of God. Often, the focus in the church is placed on proper worship when, in reality, the underlying problem is a lack of fear. Another takeaway is that properly worshipping God does not take intricate altars. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with beautiful creations for worshipping God (God does instruct the people to build the tent of meeting and the temple, both of which were gloriously and intricately made), He is also completely satisfied with an altar of earth. God has always been more interested in the hearts of His people, not the value of the offering made (Is. 1:11-31; Ps. 40:6-8; Heb. 10:4-10). This is good news because we are closer to an altar of dust than a temple, but we have been called through Christ to become the temple of the living God (2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 3:16).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:22. Where does the Scripture say the LORD talked with the people of Israel?

2. What was the initial response of the people when the LORD talked with the people? (hint: Exodus 20:19)

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 20:23. What material was specifically mentioned in God's outlawing of idol-making?

2. Do you think He was also excluding other materials as well? Why do you think the LORD chose to only mention these two materials?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 20:24. What type of altar is required? What type of altar is optional? (Hint: See Exodus 20:25). Why do you think the LORD gives another option for materials?

2. Why does God even require an altar? What is the purpose of it?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 20:24. What do you think it means for the Lord to cause His name to be remembered?
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2. What do you think it means for God to come to you and bless you? What should be your response?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 58 Discussion: Refocus Your Worship

Exodus 20:18-26 provides the Israelites with a few altar options that they could create. One was mandatory, but it was created based on the desire of the people. God would eventually provide drawings for the tent of the meeting and the Temple, all of which would also have altars to be used for the sacrifice of animals in order to remove the guilt of the people from his presence in order to properly worship. However, the Lord Jesus Christ has become the final offering for sin and guilt, and thus, the need for sin offerings has been rendered obsolete. Instead, we are to offer our bodies “as a living sacrifice before God” as a spiritual act of worship (Rom. 12:1). Talk as a group about the importance of sacrifice in your acts of worship today.

1. Icebreaker: Do you think of worship as an act of sacrifice? Why or why not?
2. Read Romans 12:1-2. In the context of this passage, what does it mean to offer your body as a living sacrifice? What are you to avoid? What are you to seek?
3. Does God still require His people to worship him on altars made by men? Why or why not?
4. Read Hebrews 9:11-14. How did Jesus change the way we use altars?
5. How does the sacrifice of Christ, once and for all for sin, shape the way you worship God?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Talk to your child about a chore that they have to perform daily, weekly, or monthly, and how tiresome it is to have to do it, over and over again. Then, have them imagine that Jesus has done that chore for them in a way where it will never have to be done again. Ask them how that would make them feel? That is the kind of feeling we bring to worship Him. A feeling of gratitude for something done on our behalf that we ourselves could never accomplish, that frees us from the work of it.

Takeaways:

1. The people feared the Lord’s presence in the storm, lightning, and thick darkness.
2. God told them to not fear Him, but instead invited them to know Him more deeply.
3. God provided a way for them to worship Him properly.