

# EXODUS

## THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

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### SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:3

To understand more about the first commandment and its implications for us today.

## A Helpful Note Before We Begin

Recall in the previous sessions that the *Ten Commandments* can be understood as “two tables,” one pertaining to our duty before God, and the other pertaining to our duty before others, hence Jesus summing up of the law in His so-called *Great Commandment* to love God and love your neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40). This division has been broadly recognized across denominations throughout history. For example, in *The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC)*, the “Decalogue” (another term for the Ten Commandments) is divided into two tables, with the first four commandments relating to our duty before God, and the remaining six relating to our duty before one another. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes these divisions as well in both *The Council of Trent* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. *The Augsburg Confession* of the Lutheran Church does as well, along with the *Eastern Orthodox Catechisms*. We will assume this division is fruitful and follow suit, and even borrow terminology from some of these historical confessions to help flesh out the meaning in clearer terms.<sup>1</sup> This also means that our focus in our study of the first four commandments will be primarily oriented towards our duty before God. The following six commandments will then shift to our duty before one another.

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### Read the Text:

“You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3, ESV)

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### Study the Text:

## No Other Gods

The first commandment establishes the importance of recognizing the LORD and Him alone as God above all things: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). But what does this mean? It is in our study of the first commandment that the benefit of the confessions and catechisms becomes most obvious. The first commandment is rather vague if no further thought is given to this. One could, for example reason: “I can have other gods and other faith commitments so long as they don’t come before my commitment to the God of the Bible. After all, that’s what it says: ‘No other gods before me.’” But surely that isn’t what this means. So, then, what does it mean?

### LUTHER’S SMALL CATECHISM

In perhaps the most concise exposition of the first commandment, the German Reformer Martin Luther simply said: “We must fear, love, and trust God more than anything else.” Luther understood the first commandment

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<sup>1</sup> Though this study will employ some of the terminology and language of the historical confessions, that does not mean an outright endorsement of all terminology and language in the confessions. Confessions are helpful in that they articulate faith, but they are also bound to broader theological commitments with which I do not fully agree.

to entail not only our loving worship of God, but our trust of Him and our fear of Him as well. While still vague, Luther helps us broaden our understanding of how this commandment impacts us beyond religious activity.

#### **WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM**

If Luther was concise, the Westminster Larger Catechism brings us the polar opposite. In the first section, the WLC asks: “What does God require in the first commandment?” It answers that our duty is, “*the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God,*” and that we should glorify Him by “*thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him, believing him, trusting, hoping, and delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man, and sorrowful when he is offended; and walking humbly with him.*”

It further asks: “What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?” The answer includes atheism, idolatry, and having “*ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him,*” as well as “*self-love, self-seeking*” and any other affections towards things other than Him. It also apostatizes praying to anyone or anything, including angels and saints (a shot at Roman Catholicism, no doubt), and anything that would grieve the Holy Spirit. Theologian John Frame notes, “The difference between Luther’s exposition and that of the Larger Catechism is that the latter tries to enumerate, as exhaustively as possible, the attitudes of heart and physical actions that are appropriate to this command and the would-be rivals of God that tempt us to violate it.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **HEIDELBERG CATECHISM**

The Heidelberg Catechism, while not as extensive as the WLC, does offer a strong, robust definition as well. It argues that that we should “flee all idolatry, sorcery, enchantments, invocation of saints, or of other creatures,” and that we rightly acknowledge the only true God, trust in Him alone, with all humility and patience expect all good from Him only, and love, fear and honor Him” with everything that we have.

## **The Identity of God Matters**

What all of these historical definitions reveal is that “to have no other gods before me” means that worship, love, trust, and fear of God are much larger than the songs we sing. Our worship entails how we understand God as well. What do I mean by that? I mean that if we worship, love, trust, and fear God, but we have a faulty or flawed understanding of who God is, we are not obeying the first commandment. Why? Because we essentially have placed another God, one that we have contrived in our own understanding, in place of the one true God. This includes, for example, rejecting God as Trinity and reducing the Son and Spirit to secondary or lesser persons. God has clearly revealed Himself as one God (Deut. 6:4) and yet we are told to confess the Triune God in both baptism and general faith (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13). To miss either of these crucial components is to have “another god” before the God revealed in Scripture. Rightly identifying God as He has revealed Himself is central to having no other gods before Him.

## **What About Now?**

There are a number of ways in which the first commandment meets us where we are today. Again, our worship of God means rightly understanding who He is. To have an attitude that says, “I just want to worship God, but not really study the Word” is to risk having other gods before the LORD. This means that, in some sense, studying God’s Word is in and of itself an act of worship. The first commandment also forces us to

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<sup>2</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 407.

examine our affections towards everything other than God, and evaluate whether we have elevated those things to a divine level. For example, do the cultural popular truths of our time dictate our actions and choices over and above the demands of Scripture? If so, it could be said that those things have taken a divine position in our lives, which violates the first commandment. That means, practically speaking, relevant topics such as sexuality, sanctity of life, and any kind of actions dictated by culture or politics that lead to a constraint of human conscience are an affront to the first commandment and should be rejected.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:3. What is the first commandment?

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2. What qualifies as another god?

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### Day Two

1. Read the excerpt from Luther's Small Catechism (p.1). What does it mean to obey the first commandment according to this catechism?

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2. What are the strengths of this exposition? What are the weaknesses? In other words, how does it fall short to adequately explain the first commandment?

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### Day Three

1. Read the excerpts from the Westminster Larger Catechism (p.2). Which parts of this do you agree with? Which parts do you disagree with?

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2. Is the larger catechism more helpful or too complicated? Why?

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### Day Four

1. How does the first commandment shape the importance of studying God's Word?

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2. How does the first commandment shape the way in which we speak out against the cultural norms of your day?
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### Discuss the Text!

## Week 48 Discussion: No Other Gods

As we've seen, the first commandment is a bit more nuanced than it first appears. Talk as a group about the importance of Bible study as it pertains to the first commandment.

1. Icebreaker: Can anyone, regardless of faith, obey the first commandment? Why or why not?
2. Why does God's identity matter to the first commandment?
3. Can you obey the first commandment and also be taken captive by culture's definition of morality?
4. Why does the first commandment matter?
5. How do you see the first commandment being disobeyed in Scripture? Give examples.

## Takeaways:

1. The first commandment is all about our love, trust, fear, and worship of the God of Scripture.
2. We are to have no other gods before Him, both in terms of practice and affection.
3. Understanding how God has revealed Himself in Scripture is necessary to obey the first commandment.