

How to Worship

Exodus 20:22-26

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus Chapter 20 and the 22nd verse. We are beginning tonight a summer study on the book of the Covenant, from Exodus 20, verse 22 to Exodus 23, verse 33.

Now, this is about the time in the book of Exodus when commentators and readers of commentaries and listeners of sermons get bored. I'm not going to let you get bored. This is great stuff! This book is the application of God's 10 words in specific areas of living and in society, and in this book of the Covenant we see issues addressed such as slavery, capital punishment, what does an 'eye for an eye' and a 'tooth for a tooth' really mean. You've heard about ten different things, I'm sure, in your life, as to what 'an eye for an eye' and a 'tooth for a tooth' really means. Well, you'd find out in Exodus 21, verses 18 through 32, what it really means. What does God say about dogs, cows, and property rights? Where else would you go but the book of the Covenant? What about God's concern for the community? How is that expressed? It's right here in the book of the Covenant. How about justice and neighbor love? Exodus is the place to find that, right in the book of the Covenant. Parties that you have to go to, right here in the book of the Covenant, and again and again an emphasis on loyalty to God in our worship. So we're going to look this summer at the book of the Covenant.

When we finish our study in the book of the Covenant at the end of Exodus 23, we will then launch into a section of Exodus beginning in chapter 24, wherein the rest of the book is about the subject of worship, and we will take that opportunity not only to explain passages of Scripture that some of us have probably never hear a sermon about, or maybe even been in a Bible study about, and also apply them to contemporary issues in worship in our own day and time. So, there is much to be offered in this section of Exodus and I trust that you sense my own energy about this passage.

The name given in the Scripture to the section of Scripture that we are looking at is 'The Book of the Covenant,' and in Exodus 24, verse 7, we're told that Moses had written down this word and was to read the Book of the Covenant to the people. This section of Exodus begins with an announcement of the laws of God in Exodus 21:1, but there is a preface to it which we are going to begin to study

tonight, beginning in Exodus 20, verse 22.

The Book of the Covenant contains applications of the Ten Commandments to specific needs in the society of Israel at the time, as well as general principles, which are universally applicable, even today. The Book of the Covenant is distinct from the Decalogue. These laws and exhortations and proclamations and negations are distinct from the Ten Commandments, the ten words, the Decalogue. Let me tell you three ways in which they are distinct. You will remember that the ten words were spoken by God to the people and written with His own finger on stone. The Book of the Covenant was read by Moses to the people and written by Moses on parchment.

Secondly, the Book of the Covenant begins, as I said, properly in Exodus 21:1 with statements about the ordinances, which God is going to set before them. Now, the word *ordinances* used in Exodus 21:1 probably indicates case law decisions resting on prior precedents. In other words we are being given a casuistry here; it's not a comprehensive legal code. It's a descriptive legal code. It gives us examples of ways in which the spirit of the principles in the Ten Commandments can be applied to specific situations.

And thirdly, the Book of the Covenant deals with specific social and economic contents. The ten words do not. The ten words are general and absolute and universal. The Book of the Covenant applies the principles of the ten words in specific situations.

So then, the Book of the Covenant is descriptive. It's application. It's illustration. Let me give you an example. In Exodus 20, verse 15, we get the commandment, "You shall not steal." Well, in the Book of the Covenant, Exodus 22, verse 1, we get the covenant application in a specific circumstance, in a specific society, of the principles set forth in Exodus 20, verse 15: "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep." And then you can go on and read the rest of those specific applications. So the ten words, the Ten Commandments, give us fundamental legal principles for personal ethics and for social ethics in Israel's society, and then the Book of the Covenant applies them to specific contexts. It's applying general principles to specific circumstances, even temporary circumstances.

Indeed, you don't have to look far to find changes in the societal law even within the books of Moses. Let me give you one example. In the passage we're going to study tonight, look at verse 24. Exodus 20, verse 24. "You shall make an altar of earth for Me and you shall sacrifice on it burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen in every place where I cause My name to be remembered." Now flip forward to Deuteronomy chapter 12 verse 5, last of the five books of Moses, where we read this: "But you shall seek the Lord at the place the Lord your God shall choose from all your tribes to establish His name, therefore His dwelling, and there you shall come." Do you see the difference

already? In Exodus 20, God is making commandments for those ad hoc altars like Noah would have set up, or like the patriarchs would have set up, or like the children of Israel would have set up as they moved around from place to place in the land, but by Deuteronomy, there is to be one place and one place only that the altar of God is set up for the people to come meet with Him. And so even in the law of Moses, moving from Exodus 20 to Deuteronomy 12, there have been changes based upon the specific situations and needs of Israel at the particular time. God is a wise lawmaker and He takes into consideration the needs and the times and the places of His people. So, the ten words give us the fundamental principles, the Book of the Covenant applies them to specific contexts.

And this Book of the Covenant also contains negative commands, case laws, exhortations, promises, and it shows God's concern that the ten words permeate the way society looks, the way society works, and the way society acts. In other words, God doesn't want our morality to be private; He wants our morality to be worked out in the social, in the public sphere. A lot of times you will hear people say "You can't legislate morality." Well folks, law is morality. That's what law is. It's public morality. God is saying in the Book of the Covenant that He wants His principles, these universal, these general, these absolute principles to be worked out and permeate the way we relate to one another in society, and He's doing it in a specific way for a specific time in this code for Israel. But there are universal principles we can learn from it even this day.

So let's hear God's word in Exodus, Chapter 20, and we'll begin in 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. 23'You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. 24'You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall 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. 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. 26'And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.'

Amen, this is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this Your word. We ask that You would teach us Your truth and by Your spirit, open our eyes to see its application to our hearts, our lives, and our church. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let me give you a long statement: Israel's worship is Word derived and Word blessed. It is a Word derived and Word blessed meeting with the One true, invisible and transcendent God, done without representation and in simplicity so as not to diminish His glory. There you have it. Exodus 20, verses 22-26 in one

sentence. That's what Moses is teaching in this passage. Let me make it easier for you, though. There are three things that Moses is driving at in this passage, and they teach us things about worship that are still valid for us today. In fact, in some ways they are especially valid to us who live in the new covenant. In some ways the things that Moses says to Israel in Exodus 20, verses 22-26, are more valid for us than they were for people who lived under the ceremonial law. Three things: (1) Worship is Word based or Word centered. (2) Worship is offered only to the true God and not by images. And (3) Worship means meeting with God. Let's look at those three things for a few moments.

I. Worship is word-based.

First of all, worship is Word-based, or you could put it this way: the worship of God is to be radically Word-centered. That's what you learn in verse 22. Now you say, what? Yes, look at verse 22 again. "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." Say that again. "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven." Now that's a strange way of talking. I would have thought that the Lord would have said, "You yourselves have heard that I have spoken to you from heaven." It is in a sense a paradox. He uses a verb, "seen" (you have seen), to talk about another verb which was not related to seeing but to hearing and speaking: *you have seen that I have spoken*. In other words, the fact that God spoke to Israel from Mt. Sinai rather than appearing to them in visible form, is a vital fact for the worship of Israel. The fact that God spoke to Israel from Sinai rather than appearing to them in visible form is vital for Israel's worship.

The very first things that God begins to teach after the 10 words have been given are things about worship and the altar. God had saved Israel to worship. He had redeemed Israel to worship. He had created Israel to worship, even as He had created man for communion. But sin had marred the possibility of unmediated fellowship with God and so God immediately starts talking about altars, because we need mediation to come into the presence of the Holy God.

But as He does begin to talk about worship and the altar, He draws attention to what God said: "You shall say to the sons of Israel, you yourselves have seen that I have spoken." What's He doing? He's drawing attention to the Word of God and He is drawing attention to the way that God revealed Himself to His people. The manifestation of God at Mt. Sinai was not in a body. God did not come in some sort of a visible, bodily form at Mt. Sinai that the people could have seen. He spoke to them out of the dark cloud. The meeting of God with Israel at Mt. Sinai on the side of Israel, had been entirely auditory, and on the side of God had been entirely oral. He had spoken to them and Israel had heard.

Furthermore, God spoke to them, notice the emphasis of verse 22, not from Mt. Sinai but from heaven. This is the transcendent God. He is not contained in a

mountain or a place. He's not constrained by a particular location. He speaks from heaven at Mt. Sinai. And so what's the significance of this? God's spoken revelation, both the mode of His speaking, or of His revealing, and the content of his speech, is determinative for the whole of Israel's worship. Israel's worship is to be radically word-based. And that means at least two things: first, verse 22 makes it clear that Israel's worship is to be Word-derived and Word-suffused. Israel's worship is derived from the Word of God and it is filled up with the Word of God. It is non-visual worship unless God Himself specifically appoints such. That's the first thing we see, that Israel's worship is Word derived and Word suffused.

But it is also, secondly, a worship of a transcendent deity; not a local deity, not a deity bound to a particular locale, not the god of the mountain, but the God of heaven and earth. This is the one true God who is being worshipped through and by the Word here in Exodus 20, verse 22. So that's the first thing we learn about worship: that worship is Word based. "You have seen that I have spoken."

II. The worship of God is only to be offered to the true God and not by images.

Secondly, in verse 23, we see that the worship of God is only to be offered to the true God and not by images. The worship of God is to be offered to none other but Him, and not by images. The fact that the God, the one true God, spoke to Israel from Sinai, is to evoke from Israel loyalty and unqualified obedience. Notice how verse 23 combines insights from both the first and second commandments: "You shall not make other gods besides Me, gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves." In other words, worship God, worship God alone, and do not worship God by images. He just sums up the first and second commandments right there in verse 23. And this command is put in the negative. It prohibits the worship of anything else other than the one true God. It prohibits as well the making of gods, that is, the making of visual images of gods, no matter how costly they are, even if made of gold and silver. Moses says *no*. God says *no*. Even if they are meant to be representations of the one true God, God says *no*. Isn't it ironic that within the matter of a few chapters we will read the story of Israel breaking this law explicitly. Fairly timely, wasn't it?

Our worship of God, this command makes clear, is not to be associated with visual forms. Because Israel saw God speak, she is to reject idols. The great Jewish commentator, Sarna, says "God may never be represented in any shape or form, nor may God be associated with any idol such as other peoples, except as a God, or we might add, as ways of worshipping god or God." God indicates here a severe restriction on human creativity in His worship. We are not, He says, to copy the nations, however clever and beautiful may be their idols, however clever and beautiful their rights may be. We are to bind ourselves to His word, we're to observe His prohibition. And so, Israel's worship was to be

exclusively given to the one true God and it was not to be offered through unappointed visible means. It was to be Word-based worship of the one true God. This is why the Reformers criticized the use of images in worship in their own time. This is why Protestant houses of worship are plain. They can be beautiful like this one but they're plain. They are bereft of over-religious symbolism. They usually have no stained glass or crosses or representations of deity. Why? Because Word-based worship is the point. We worship God according to the Word. He gives us two dramas, and two dramas only: baptism and the Lord's Supper. And other than that, the service is Word-based. We worship God by the Word.

III. Worship is meeting with God.

One last thing we see here and I've run out of time. Look at verses 24 through 26. "Worship is meeting with God." The worship of God is only to be done through appointed means and even unadorned means, but it is meeting with God. Let me give you another long sentence: The worship of God involves, at its heart, meeting with God to praise and to thank Him and to receive blessing, and therefore nothing should happen in worship that detracts from that or is undirected by God. "You shall make an altar of earth for Me," He says in verse 24, "and you shall 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."

Notice in this passage what God does. He warrants two types of altars here. One made of earth, and one made of uncut stone. Do you see God's command for unadorned simplicity? Can you imagine a better way to emphasize that it doesn't matter what that altar looks like — the important thing is what's on top of it. It's not the altar, it's not the vehicle, it's the sacrifice that matters, for you to be in fellowship with the living God. The altar is just the vehicle for the sacrifice. Can you imagine a better way of emphasizing that truth to the people of God? Sure, the pagans have some beautiful altars, but they're worshipping the wrong god with the wrong sacrifice. And so, he draws attention by this unadorned altar to the sacrifice and to the God that we desire to have fellowship with.

We have something like the original of Matthew 18, verse 20, and John 4, verses 21 and 24 right here in verse 24 of Exodus, chapter 20. God says that "He is worshipped and present wherever He causes His name to be honored." Every site becomes sacred just by His presence, and He promises blessings where His covenant name is remembered.

But look at something else in verse 24. Notice that God says what? When you do what I say, I will come to you. That's the whole ball of wax, folks. That's what worship is about: meeting with God. And here He's saying, "You obey Me, You worship Me according to the Word. You seek My face where I cause Myself to be

named, and I will meet with you.”

What's the great promise of the Bible? “I will be your God; you will be My people.” What is the great manifestation of the promise of the Bible before the consummation? God with us. What is God saying here? You worship according to My commands, I will meet with you. I will be with you. It is a foretaste of an eternity of glory. It's unbelievable.

The stone altars are to be uncut, he says in verse 25. Why? Well, it discourages the making of images. It also discourages copy-cattng the cultures around them, and if you turn to the book of Kings you'll find that Ahaz will do just that. He goes up and he sees this awesome altar while he's visiting Damascus and he sends word back: ‘You know, our altar is kind of plain.’ Set it aside. We're going to do the new, improved altar model’. God says, ‘None of that here.

Notice in verse 26, exposure of nakedness is forbidden. Why? Well, because ritual nudity and sexuality were generally practiced in the worship of the nations around Israel, and God is saying, “None of that here.” Once again, there is to be no copy-cattng of neighbors’ religious practices and rituals because God alone determines what His people must do in worship. Worship is to be simple and characterized by divine communion and nothing is to detract from that communion with God.

You sense already the richness of these commands. Maybe this is a section of Scripture that you've never read before. It's all that rich. Let's study it together with thankfulness to God this summer. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God we thank you for Your Word and for Yourself in worship. Bless us as we draw near and cause Your Name to be honored and remembered in our midst. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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