

# “Exodus”

## Fall Series 2

### Lesson 5

## “Exodus 20:1-21”

**Objective:** To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

**Materials:** The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

#### Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

In the previous chapter the stage was set for the words of God to be delivered to the people of Israel. In this chapter, those words are actually delivered to His community of people, not just to a single individual as had happened in earlier times with figures such as Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob. God speaks to His community in a way that had never occurred before. What we have come to call, in our day, the “Ten Commandments” is delivered to them. This English title for these words of God is derived from the traditional, although inaccurately literal, English rendering of the Hebrew phrase found in Exodus and Deuteronomy “The Ten Words” (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים - *‘aseret ha-devarim*); this phrase appears in Exodus 34:28<sup>1</sup> and in Deuteronomy 4:13.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew term for “commandment” is not actually used in either of these references, so certainly that aspect of the English translation is inaccurate. The Hebrew literally says, “the ten words,” which was then translated into the Old Greek translation at Exodus 34:28, in Alexandria, (in the Septuagint) as the *deka logous* (τοὺς δέκα λόγους - “the ten words”). This gave

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<sup>1</sup> **Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He didn’t eat any bread or drink any water. He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten words.** CEB.

<sup>2</sup> **The LORD declared his covenant to you, which he commanded you to do—the Ten Commandments—and wrote them on two stone tablets.** CEB.

rise to the more accurate reference for these words as the “Decalogue.” Traditional Jewish exegesis has in fact actually derived thirteen, not ten commandments from the “Decalogue.” This phrase (“The ten words”) is understood in rabbinic texts, and generally in Hebrew to denote the revealed words of God for His community. This meaning is derived from the understanding of Jeremiah 5:13<sup>3</sup>, where the Hebrew term *debar* (דָּבָר) denotes the revealed word of God.<sup>4</sup>

There are several Biblical texts that testify to the inscribing of the Decalogue upon two stone tablets.<sup>5</sup> As we mentioned in the previous lesson it was common practice to deposit such documents in a safe place, and that place was often a sacred place. This practice can be seen in a treaty between the Hittite King Shuppiluliumas (around 1375-1335 B.C.) and King Mattiwaza of Mittani in upper Mesopotamia which notes that each of the two parties was to deposit a copy of their treaty document in their respective temples before the shrine of the deity. In a similar

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<sup>3</sup> **The prophets are so much wind; the word isn't in them. Thus and so may it be done to them.** CEB.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15; 34:1, 4; Deuteronomy 4:13; 9:10, 11, 15; 10:1-5; 1 Kings 8:9=2 Chronicles 5:10. cf. Exodus 32:19; 34:28.

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fashion, it is recorded that Ramses II of Egypt and the Hittite King Hattusilis concluded a treaty around 1269 B.C. and within the text it is said that the document was inscribed on a tablet of silver and was placed at the feet of the god. In Rome it was the common practice that treaties were written on tablets of bronze and then stored in the Capitol. With the Israelites a special container was constructed for housing the stone tablets and that receptacle was then stored in the Holy of Holies, first in the tabernacle and then later in the Temple.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that the practice of housing such documents, like the ones produced here, followed the tradition of Ancient Near Eastern treaties rather than the practice of contracts, which were not stored in such a manner.

The container for the storage of the stone tablets in Israel, would be referred to as the “Ark of the Covenant.” We are not sure why two tablets were necessary for this text as it could have easily all be inscribed on a single tablet. In the Palestinian Talmud<sup>7</sup> the tradition is presented that the two tablets contained two complete copies of the Decalogue.<sup>8</sup> It is to be noted as we come to 20:1 the

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<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> This is a document that records the reasonings and commentary of the Rabbis of Israel.

<sup>8</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 108.

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words recorded here are said to have been spoken by God Himself. This is then some of the most direct revelation to be found in all of Scripture. This is a unique and special moment in history. As we move to 20:2 we have the preamble that one would expect to be a part of ancient treaty proceedings, which states the relationship between the two parties at the beginning of the covenant. “YHWH your God” the one who brought them (Israel) out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery is identified very formally and clearly as the one who is speaking. The indication here is very precisely set within the contextual framework of human history. God is not as the Deists would have people believe distant, and impersonal; He is, in fact, very personal and very much engaged in the historical timeline of humanity. This is demonstrated through the defeat of Egypt, the freeing of the Hebrew slaves, and now through the divine revelation of His words as the basis for this covenant with Israel.

You may wonder why all of this is of any importance to you today. There are a number of reasons: One reason is that some scholars would seek to date this material to a time far later than the time of Moses. Against such a proposition is the fact that the



style of the covenant described here fits well with what research has demonstrated was common well before the time of Moses, and also during his time. Secondly, a number of people have denied that God intervenes in human history. The intent of this passage of Scripture is certainly to demonstrate the opposite, and to declare that God does indeed intervene in human history. Additionally some have put forward the position that God is a distant being that does not engage in close contact, or personal relationship with human beings. This chapter would absolutely make the declaration that such a supposition is false. Though none of these things would prove that the text is what it purports to be they certainly would seem to leave open the possibility that the text is exactly what it purports to be, God's word, given to His people, that He sought personal relationship with after redeeming them from slavery in Egypt.

At 20:3 it should be noted that there is no way, in Hebrew, to express the exact phrase "to have," but instead the text here expresses the idea that the possession of other gods by these people is forbidden.<sup>9</sup> The conceptual idea here is expressed in

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<sup>9</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 109.

English as closely as possible by the concept of “to have,” but this is not an exact translation of the Hebrew text. The exact translation is difficult to comprehend in English, but goes something like this: **It is not permitted for there to be to you other gods upon the face.** There are 138 occurrences of the Hebrew expression *al peney* (עַל-פְּנֵי) - “upon the face” literally) in the Masoretic Hebrew Text of the Old Testament. Of these occurrences, there are 12 in the Hebrew Scriptures with special meanings and the one we have here is one of those twelve with a special meaning.<sup>10</sup> In the Old Greek translation of Scripture (the Septuagint) this phrase was translated as “but,” or “only me” (πλὴν ἐμοῦ). This would then indicate that the Hebrew expression was understood in the second century B.C., when this translation was done, as calling for a singular devotion to *YHWH* over all other so-called gods (*Elohim* - אֱלֹהִים). This would seem to express the intent of the Hebrew text accurately. At this point in the text there is not a denial of the actual existence of other so-called gods, but an emphasis on a singular loyalty to *YHWH*. The

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<sup>10</sup> Raija Sollamo, *Renderings of Hebrew Semiprepositions in the Septuagint* In the *Annales Academię Scientiarum Fennicę Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum* series, Vol. 19 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1979), p. 102.

claim for *YHWH*'s exclusiveness in the sense that He alone has existence is not overtly contained in this first commandment.<sup>11</sup>

The first commandment describes the relationship of *YHWH* to the people of Israel by categorically eliminating these other gods from being “before,” or in the “presence” of the Israelites.<sup>12</sup>

The word used here for the other “gods” (*Elohim* - אֱלֹהִים) is the word that is normally used to refer to the one true God, *YHWH*. It is in fact a plural form, even though we translate it as singular when it refers to *YHWH*. The emphasis here is expressed, in this beginning time of the nation Israel, to focus upon those who are being called to be the unique people of *YHWH* with the primary issue being loyalty and not a discussion regarding the existence of other gods. For now, God speaks in a manner that will allow the people to focus on the crucial element of singular devotion to Him rather than upon the issue of whether other gods actually exist.<sup>13</sup>

There are times when we are distracted by this second argument and we tend to focus upon the issue of the existence of other gods

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<sup>11</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in The Old Testament Library Series (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 403.

<sup>12</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 403.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus*, in The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 414.

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so tightly that we can fail to see the focus of the text here. God wants the emphasis here to concentrate upon the people being loyal to Him exclusively. He has just defeated all of the other so-called gods of the Egyptians in order to free Israel. They (whoever, or whatever they are) were truly defeated by *YHWH* (something exists in order to be defeated). This was not the place to teach the Israelites that they are not in fact actually gods: There will be time in the future to teach that point; in fact the reality is that these beings are not of anything like the nature and power of *YHWH*. He is unique, but what *YHWH* is here calling Israel to focus upon is their singular loyalty to Him. He is not interested in the issue of monotheism here.

At 20:4 the focus shifts to the next area of concern with regard to maintaining focus on “loyalty,” which is the issue of making idols. The making of idols in the ancient world was a common practice. There were even ceremonies whereby these idols, made of wood and stone, were supposedly brought to life. There are certainly times when the word idolatry does not simply refer to such images, but to anything that subverts loyalty to *YHWH*. That is the focus here. The people of Israel are being

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called to a singular devotion and loyalty to *YHWH*. The form of that devotion will be specified with greater and greater specificity in other texts that come after this, but the central, the crucial issue, is “faithfulness,” or loyalty to *YHWH*. The people are called to express singular allegiance to *YHWH* alone. As noted earlier so often we focus in this text upon the issue of polytheism, but this is not the focus here. The ancient people had a propensity to syncretism of many ideas from a variety of religious practices and many gods, each one calling for a level of devotion. Such a practice would fail to recognize the central precept of singular loyalty and devotion that is being called for here by *YHWH*. This is a timeless issue in fact; even if the tendency today is not to build little statues that we will worship, or bow down to in acts of visible devotion, we are to maintain singular devotion to God.

At 20:5 we are told that God is “jealous” (אֵיֵקָו), which is a word indicative of “exclusive” service and devotion. To fail in this singular devotion is to invoke the anger and wrath of God. God is not dispassionate. Behind the literal meaning of this word is “to become red.” God will not be indifferent to human beings, He in fact cares intensely. God is not apathetic. This caring is the same

type of expression that is used in association with the marriage bond.<sup>14</sup> This word “...underscores the vigorous, intensive, and punitive nature of the divine response to apostasy and to modes of worship unacceptable to Himself as an expression of disloyalty. The implications of being in covenant with *YHWH* as a community means that the community itself is bound by dual implications. The community is collectively responsible for its actions and the individual too has responsibility for behavior that affects the community. There is thus forged a mutuality between the community and the individual. What has impact on one generation will in fact have an impact on generations that follow.<sup>15</sup>

**<sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,....**<sup>16</sup> Certainly what is said here regarding the punishing of the children for the sins of the parents is seen by modern peoples as unfair and even by ancients it was often seen as something that generated hopelessness

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<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 3:14.

<sup>15</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> CEB.



(Lamentations 5:7<sup>17</sup>). Over and over again I have heard people make a statement about how simple Scripture is and that we just want the simple message of Scripture. Certainly there are some aspects of Scripture that are simple, but there is also a great deal in Scripture that challenges all of the intelligence and understanding that is possible for us as human beings. After all, we are talking about a God who is beyond even our wildest imaginations in His power, in His wisdom, in His creativity and in His love. He is also more just, and more righteous than we can imagine. So this passage gives us a particular difficulty and certainly for those who have devoted their lives to the study of Scripture this has proven to be an extremely challenging passage of Scripture. Perhaps for those of you who only want to know the simple things of God, the surface things of God, you will want to stop reading at this point and perhaps pick up again later.

At Exodus 34:6-7 we have these words: **“The LORD! The LORD! a God who is compassionate and merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> showing great loyalty to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin**

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<sup>17</sup> **Our fathers have sinned and are gone, but we are burdened with their iniquities.** CEB.

**and rebellion, yet by no means clearing the guilty, punishing for their parents' sins their children and their grandchildren, as well as the third and the fourth generation."**<sup>18</sup> The implication of this text is clear: children suffer for the sins committed by their parents. On the other hand we have Deuteronomy 24:16: **Parents shouldn't be executed because of what their children have done; neither should children be executed because of what their parents have done. Each person should be executed for their own guilty acts.**<sup>19</sup> Also in 2 Kings 14:5-6 we have this verse: **Once he had secured control over his kingdom, he executed the officials who had assassinated his father the king. <sup>6</sup> However, he didn't kill the children of the murderers, because of what is written in the Instruction scroll from Moses, where the LORD commanded, Parents shouldn't be executed because of what their children have done; neither should children be executed because of what their parents have done. Each person should be executed for their own guilty acts.**<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> CEB.

<sup>19</sup> CEB.

<sup>20</sup> CEB.

Rabbi Sacks says, “There is an obvious resolution. The first statement refers to Divine justice, ‘at the hands of heaven.’ The second in Deuteronomy, refers to human justice as administered in a court of law.”<sup>21</sup> I have no real idea about whether Rabbi Sacks is actually correct here. This is an issue that obviously is extraordinarily difficult. Largely today we just choose to ignore these difficulties as being in the Old Testament, but the truth is this is an issue that runs deeper as it reflects on the nature of God and our relationship with Him. The question of punishing people other than those that do something wrong is really hard for those who look at things through a lens of individuality. We are not accustomed to punishing a group for what we see as an individual crime, and yet there is a sense in which this is exactly what happens in the case of wars, and even war crimes. Often whole nations are punished when the individuals within that nation commit something deserving of punishment.

This issue was one that deeply concerned the prophets too.<sup>22</sup> In the two quotes from the prophets it is the case that they

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<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “To the Third and Fourth Generation,” *Covenant & Conversation* (29th of August, 2015), <http://rabbisacks.org/to-the-third-and-fourth-generations-ki-tetzei-5775/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:1-4.



were seeking to give people hope at one of the lowest points in their history. The prophets are deeply concerned about the issue of Divine judgement and justice. The people sitting and weeping by the waters of Babylon were in this situation because of the sins of their ancestors. Their plight was desperate and their exile seemed to stretch endlessly into the future. Ezekiel and Jeremiah counseled them against their despair. Their future was said to be in their own hands. They were told that if they returned to God, that He would return them back to their land.<sup>23</sup> The guilt of those previous generations would not remain attached to them. In general the rabbinic sages rejected the notion that children could be punished, even at the hands of God, for the sins of their parents.<sup>24</sup>

The principle of individual responsibility is a basic tenet of Judaism, as it was in other cultures of the Near East. What is at stake here is the deep understanding of the scope of responsibility that we bear if we take seriously our roles as parents, neighbors, townspeople, citizens, and children of the covenant. Judicially it is

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<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 15:9.

<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "To the Third and Fourth Generation," *Covenant & Conversation* (29th of August, 2015), <http://rabbisacks.org/to-the-third-and-fourth-generations-ki-tetzei-5775/>.



the case that only the criminal is responsible for his crime. However, the Torah implies that we are in fact our brother's keeper. We share a collective responsibility for the moral and spiritual health of society, and of community. Legal responsibility is relatively easy to define, but moral responsibility is something altogether larger and more difficult to define. The duty of parents to teach their children is fundamental to both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>25</sup> The great Jewish Rabbi Maimonides considers allowing children to sin to be one of the gravest possible sins for a parent, a sin for which there is no opportunity for repentance. He said, "One who sees his son becoming associated with evil influences and refrains from rebuking him. Since his son is under his authority, were he to rebuke him, he would have separated himself [from these influences]. Hence, [by refraining from admonishing him, it is considered] as if he caused him to sin."<sup>26</sup>

Though this is an extremely difficult passage (Exodus 20:5), and far from simple and easy to comprehend for us it is something we are challenged to grapple with and to consider. The reality is

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<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "To the Third and Fourth Generation," *Covenant & Conversation* (29th of August, 2015), <http://rabbisacks.org/to-the-third-and-fourth-generations-ki-tetzei-5775/>.

<sup>26</sup> *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 4:1

that there is much in our world that is complex and hard to understand and the most complex and mysterious part of our universe is the Creator and Sovereign of that universe, *YHWH*. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks challenges us with these words: “If we fail to honour our responsibilities as parents, then though no law will hold us responsible, society’s children will pay the price. They will suffer because of our sins.”<sup>27</sup> In the very midst of this challenging section of Scripture we come to a verse that we like far more and find far more comforting, which speaks of God (20:6) “...showing covenant love (אֲהַבָה) to the thousandth generation of those who keep my commandments.” There is a link between the love that God has for us, and His covenant with us. In the Old Greek translation of this verse we find the word “Agape” (ἀγαπήσιν) used: this word expressed more than just a feeling, or an emotion, it is a determined covenant loyalty, a concerted effort to love someone. There is a connection in this verse between “love” and “keeping” the commandments of God. The two are in fact inseparable.

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<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “To the Third and Fourth Generation,” *Covenant & Conversation* (29th of August, 2015), <http://rabbisacks.org/to-the-third-and-fourth-generations-ki-tetzei-5775/>.

It should be noted that it is often taught that the New Testament writers picked up this word *agape* and imbued it with new meaning and richness that it did not have before. This is not totally accurate. Already in the Old Greek translation of Scripture, the Septuagint, this word had already be imbued with a greater richness and beauty than it had among the Greeks and the Romans. This was a word that was linked with covenant loyalty here at the very inception of community covenant with *YHWH* and we must remember this aspect of the word's meaning as we come to the New Testament lest we fail in our understanding of the richness and depth of the concepts that this word is meant to convey. We also can miss out on the calling to singular devotion and loyalty that this word and its Hebrew partner word *Hesed* (חֶסֶד) are meant to convey.

When we get the 20:7 we have a prohibition against the use of the Name of *YHWH* in a way that is “empty,” “vain,” or “to no good purpose.” This is said to be the background for the refusal of at least some Jews around the second century B.C. to pronounce the name of God at all, substituting instead the word *Adonai* (Lord). This same view may not have been held by all Jews, and

yet we in Christianity have adopted the practices of those refusing to pronounce it. This is despite the fact that the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*) occurs 6828 times in the Hebrew Bible. Still today this practice of substituting the word “LORD” prevails in our English translations and in our churches. I guess if you forget the name of God altogether you are at least kept safe from breaking this command. Try that with your wife and see how she likes it. This verse calls us to speak His name with reverence and respect not to forget it, or never speak it. Not saying it all, in my mind, is most disrespectful.

At 20:8 the people are called to remember “the sabbath” (הַשַּׁבָּת) and to keep it “holy.” What does it mean to keep it holy? It means that this is a day when the Israelites are to focus upon something other than getting by in life, and upon survival. They are called upon to “trust” *YHWH*. That trust is to be expressed by setting aside time devoted to something other than scratching out a living and existing. This meaning is expressed more fully in the verses that follow (9-11). The ceasing from regular work on this day is an expression of “trust” in God and of honoring and remembering Him as creator, sustainer, and

covenant partner. This commandment is not just an obligation, it is an act of remembrance and loyalty that is expressed in concrete actions.

At 20:12 the Israelites are told to, **Honor your father and your mother, so that long may be your days in the land that YHWH your God is giving you.** Notice that here there is a promise not only of long life, but long life in the land being given them if they keep this command. This command marks the transition from the first to the second group of divine declarations. It simultaneously possesses both religious and social dimensions. The relationship between God and Israel is often expressed in filial terms.<sup>28</sup> The admonition to express honor is only expressed as an obligation for God and parents. The prophet Ezekiel<sup>29</sup> includes the dishonoring of parents as one among the other grievous sins that characterized the generation living in the time of the destruction of the first temple.<sup>30</sup>

At 20:13 there is the admonition not to “murder.” The Hebrew stem *ratsach* (רצח) applies only to illegal killing and

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<sup>28</sup> Exodus 4:22-23; Jeremiah 31:20; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:6.

<sup>29</sup> Ezekiel 22:7.

<sup>30</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 113.

unlike other Hebrew verbs that can express the concept of taking a life this stem is never used in the context of prohibition of exacting justice in the case of a criminal execution, or for killing in war. This passage of Scripture cannot be used as justification for either pacifism, or for the abolition of the death penalty. Genesis 9:6 provides the basis for this prohibition of committing murder.<sup>31</sup> This then is taken as meaning that society must in fact exact punishment for the act of murder because life is ultimately derived from God. The prerogative to take life belongs to God alone and thus the act of murder infringes upon the sovereignty of God. By this terrible act, the murderer usurps this sovereignty of God and commits an affront to God's majesty. For this reason it is not considered to be within the power of humans to forgive the act of murder, or to commute the death penalty into ransom as Numbers 35:31 makes plain.<sup>32</sup> All homicide is considered fratricide as was the first murder committed by Cain (Genesis 4:8-10).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> **Whoever sheds human blood, by a human his blood will be shed; for in the divine image God made human beings.** CEB.

<sup>32</sup> **You may not accept a ransom for the life of a killer, who is guilty of a capital crime, for he must definitely be put to death.** CEB.

<sup>33</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 113-114.

At 20:14 there is the prohibition against adultery. In a society where polygamy, but not polyandry (a woman having more than one husband) is socially acceptable, the definition of adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between a married man who is not her lawful husband and the wife of another man. This was the definition of adultery throughout the ancient Near East. Adultery was a private wrong committed against the husband and was seen as an infringement of his exclusive rights of possession. Therefore the rights to decide punishment for this crime were left to the husband in most of the ancient Near East. In Israel however, there was a sacral dimension to marriage and adultery is considered both a public wrong and an affront to God and therefore the husband has no right to pardon his faithless wife, or her lover.<sup>34</sup> The gravity of this sin may be gauged by its position in the decalogue - between murder and theft - and the extremity of the penalty it was given.<sup>35</sup>

At 20:15 we come to the prohibition against stealing. The word used here is not specific and can include kidnapping as well as what we might term theft. At 20:16 there is the prohibition

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<sup>34</sup> Leviticus 20:10.

<sup>35</sup> Where a woman takes more than one husband.

against bearing false witness. Each individual is here addressed as the potential witness in a juridical forum. Bearing false witness in such a circumstance would undermine public confidence and jeopardize the very stability of society itself. Witnesses in capital cases would be required to initiate the execution of the sentence in capital cases (Deuteronomy 17:7). At 20:17 is the prohibition against coveting anything belonging to your neighbor. Action, not merely a mental state, seems to be implied in this prohibition.<sup>36</sup> Though there is an inward element to this prohibition as well as is implied in Proverbs 6:25.<sup>37</sup>

At 20:18-21 there is fear expressed by the people because of the thunder and the lightening, the sound of the trumpet, and the thick smoke rising up. The people entreated Moses to speak with them and not to let God speak to them. Moses entreats the people not to be afraid of God explaining that God has appeared in this frightening manner in order to “test” them and to keep them from sinning. The purpose of inciting “fear” is in order to protect the people to help them avoid sin. It is also a part of letting them know that God is a God of justice; someone who has the power to

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<sup>36</sup> Exodus 34:24.

<sup>37</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 114.

enforce justice. Moses listens to the people and he approaches the thick darkness where he was to hear the words of *YHWH*.

At 20:22-26 Moses is given further instructions for the people. He is to remind the Israelites that they have seen God speak from heaven. This is a sign of who and what He is as the creator and sovereign God of the universe. He is like no other. They are warned against making idols of silver and gold alongside Him. Again the emphasis is upon their complete and total loyalty to God alone. They are to make an altar of “earth” (*adamah* - אֲדָמָה) and use this for sacrifices. If they make a stone altar it was to be made only of uncut stones. Rashbam indicates that the reason for this was in order to remove the temptation to cut images into the stones. Those who offered sacrifices upon the altar were to do so with a sense of propriety. This contrasts with what we find in many of the scenes in Near Eastern art that feature priests officiating in the nude.<sup>38</sup>

The instructions given here are meant to begin bringing the people together as a community of people that were orderly, that expressed a sense of decorum, and respect, and that honored God

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<sup>38</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 117.



by reflecting His nature in the world. They were to be a beacon of light shining in the darkness and through their special relationship with *YHWH* they were to express God's care, concern, and commitment for humanity. God would demonstrate through His ongoing relationship with the descendants of Abraham His faithfulness and His desire for genuine, close relationship with people. We today, in the church, are called to continue in these goals as the branch grafted into the root of Israel.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Romans 11:11-31.

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# Synopsis

This section begins with the expression that “God spoke:”

What a powerful expression, God speaking to His people. He is not distant and far away, disinterested, or distracted, but engaged and actively seeking relationship. He seeks not to just be one of many relationships in our lives, but to be the defining relationship of our identity. To this end He defines what real relationship should look like; one that is not damaged, broken and dysfunctional. He seeks the relationship with us for which we were created. He seeks close, exclusive, and loyal relationship.

In this He defines what that looks like as we do not innately know and we certainly cannot figure it out on our own despite our ancestors pursuing knowledge and eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There is no way that we will ever be able to define good and evil as well as *YHWH* the creator, and the sovereign of all that is. God wants us to understand and to experience the nature of true and complete loyalty, the kind of loyalty that He has for us. The fullest expression of that loyalty would come in Jesus Christ, but God continually seeks to help His

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people understand and experience it, as well as to live it. He gives them means to express that loyalty to Him.

God warns His people of the consequences and the dangers of relationship with Him. True relationship is always dangerous because it means opening ourselves up in order to be vulnerable, to be hurt, to care. God cares and when we fail to respond to Him in faith, trust and loyalty we cause Him pain. He loves us passionately and is jealous for our loyalty. He seeks to lead us deeper and deeper into loyalty and relationship through His commands. He seeks us, and He seeks in order for us to fulfill our true destiny as people made for relationship with Him. He teaches us patiently as a father teaches his children. He calls us home.

# Questions

1. What images come to your mind when you hear the phrase “ten commandments?”
2. Why do you think it is important for societies to have rules?
3. Do you think it is important for the people of a society to know what the rules are?
4. Do you think it is better for rules to be simple, or to be complicated? Why?
5. Why do you think God chose to make a covenant with Israel rather than to initiate a contract with them?
6. What do you think it means to us for God to be willing to become personally involved with Israel?
7. Why do you think it was important for God to speak directly to the people?
8. What are some ways that “loyalty” can be expressed?
9. How would you define “loyalty?”
10. How important is “loyalty” to you? Why?
11. What are some things that can happen to indicate that “loyalty” is not genuine?
12. What do “idols” have to do with “loyalty?”
13. What are some ways that you can tell a person has strong passions?
14. Are strong passions good, or bad?
15. How important is passion in having a strong marriage?

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16. What do you think it means for God to be passionate?
  17. What are some ways the sins of one person can affect another person?
  18. Do people suffer consequences as a result of the actions of others?
  19. How is the individual responsible to the community of which that person is a part?
  20. In what ways are parents responsible for the actions of their children?
  21. In what ways have you seen unconditional “love” exhibited?
  22. What are some ways that you express reverence and respect?
  23. What are some ways that you can honor your parents?
  24. How is murder and affront to God?
  25. In what ways is marriage something that is sacred?
  26. What are some ways that sharing common values promote community?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that God is not distant and far away and that He truly seeks and desires interaction with His creation and especially with human beings, those that bear His image. He calls those who would join in relationship with Him to have a singular loyalty to Him and to demonstrate this in acts of trust, and in acts of separation from other so-called gods. What are some of the ways that you express your loyalty to God?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words speaking directly to His community, those He had redeemed from slavery and bondage; those He had rescued and delivered from false gods, and from false security. God does not stand far off, but comes near in an expression of His desire to restore the relationship that had been broken by sin. God seeks to mould this people into a community that could be a part of His redemption of creation. God is in these words calling for His people to trust Him and demonstrate that trust in the way that they live their life. When is a time in your life when you felt especially close to God?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

People are motivated by their desires and their aspirations to do all sorts of things in this life. Animals too have desires and aspirations and we often call these instincts. We as human beings have the cognitive ability to think through and to process things in a way that animals do not. Perhaps this is a part of what it means to be made in the image of God. God calls for people to live their lives as a reflection of their trust, and their loyalty to Him. He is a God of order and not of chaos, and so He gives commands that will promote orderly society, which should be an expression of loyalty to Him. What motivations drive the decisions that you make in life?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The Word of God is calling for us to live life with a set of standards and perceptions that are based upon who He is and the calling that He has for our lives. The word calls us to see the world through a lens that has been created and defined by Him. God came down upon a mountain in the Sinai peninsula in order to reach out to a people that were powerless and lost. God sought to form them into a force for good, for His Kingdom, for them to be His people. God is not distant and far away, He is near and present, seeking the restoration of relationship. What are some ways that the Word of God challenges you to live differently each day?