

# Exodus 20:18

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Over the past few months, we have been considering the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments given by God to His people, what we sometimes describe as the moral law that was relevant when first given and remains relevant and applicable to us today. And this morning, we arrived at the final of the commandments and were considering what there was to teach us there in that particular commandment.

Now, on each occasion, as we have gone through all ten of the commandments, even in the reading of the commandment, but I trust in the presentation of the meaning of the commandments, there has been implicit, perhaps often explicit, a challenge, an invitation to respond to the commandment and to the demands that God places upon us through these commandments. And, of course, we can respond in a number of different ways. We can be convicted as we appreciate that we have disobeyed. Perhaps that has been so for you, one or other, perhaps several of the commandments as you have considered them anew. They are familiar, of course, to us, but you have been convicted.

You have been conscious that you have not been obeyed. And that has led to repentance, to seeking God's forgiveness, and a resolve to no longer be guilty of breaking a given commandment. I trust that for many of us, that has been one of the ways that we have responded. But, of course, we can respond in other ways. We can question, or indeed reject, the authority of the God who commands us, and not be willing to submit ourselves to His authority, as He would claim that authority over us in the giving of these commandments. We might be a little more clever and question whether these commandments apply to us, and maybe a question whether we really are under one or other of these commandments. It's another way that we can respond. We can delude ourselves that we are fine, that we're not breaking them, that we're living our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. And these commandments really have little to say to us other than to remind us of how well we are keeping them. Or perhaps a more likely response for many of us is that we simply conveniently forget what we hear. And we do not allow the divine imperatives to affect us, or influence the way we live. Perhaps few of us would be so foolish to say, well, these commandments aren't relevant to me, or I'm keeping them all perfectly. Perhaps nobody here would make such a foolish claim. But perhaps many of us will hear them and say, yes, that's true. Yes, that's important. Yes, that's something I need to respond to. But then Monday comes along, and Tuesday, and the busyness of the week, and the duties that we all have to respond to, and we quietly and conveniently forget what God has said to us through His Word. Well, there are many ways in which we can respond. What I want to do this evening is to conclude our treatment of the commandments by considering this matter of our response, but to do so by examining how the original audience responded, and drawing some lessons from that. We have read in Exodus and in Deuteronomy an account of how the

Israelites responded to God speaking, giving them these commandments. And we want to think about that response, and as I say, draw some lessons from it. In the passages that we read in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy chapter 5, we have recorded for us the immediate response of the people. But then as we follow through the order of events through Exodus, we are privy to the subsequent response of the Israelites to the giving of the law of God. Now, I'm not talking about going several years into the future, but just a few weeks. And as time allows, we want to not limit ourselves just to the immediate response, but also to just flick a few pages, as it were, a few weeks forward to see how the Israelites subsequently responded to the law of God as it was given to them, and very particularly the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments that they received from God. So, let's begin by noticing some of the ways in which the Israelites responded. And the first thing I want to draw your attention to and to consider is the first response that we are told of, and that is that they

trembled with fear as they heard the Ten Commandments declared to them. It's in the first verse that we read in Exodus chapter 20.

We notice that the account of the commandments concludes in verse 17 with the Tenth Commandment, and then we read in verse 18, when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. So, the first thing we're told concerning their response is that they trembled with fear. Now, to better appreciate what is going on here, we need to note that the clear, unequivocal testimony of Scripture is that the words of the Decalogue, of the Ten Commandments, and particularly and exclusively the Ten Commandments, were addressed directly by God to the people. Now, that's the clear testimony of the accounts that we have, but sometimes we maybe have the idea that all of it was through Moses. Moses went up into the mountain, he heard from God, then he came down and said, well, this is what God has told me. He brought down the tablets of stone and said, look, here it is. And of course, that was the means for much of the law, but the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, was delivered by God in a unique way and in a particular way, and it was delivered directly to the people. Let's just notice in Deuteronomy and chapter 5 and verse 4, there are many occasions where this is made very clear. We'll limit ourselves just to one or two of them, which will be more than sufficient to prove the point. But if we look in Deuteronomy chapter 5 in verse 4, this is just before we are given an account of the commandments, we read as follows, the Lord spoke to you. Moses is reminding the people, and he says to the people, the Lord spoke to you, the people, face to face, out of the fire on the mountain. Then in verse 22, at the close, or as the account of the commandments is concluded, we read in verse 22, these are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness, and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me. And there are other references, but that is sufficient. So it's important to have that clear in our minds. The Decalogue, the Ten Commandments were delivered in this very dramatic way by God. God spoke them to the whole assembly. No mediation, no Moses to hear first and then tell them, no stone tablets that were brought down for them to discover for the first time. That was subsequent.

[ 8 : 25 ] But God declared directly these words to the whole assembly. And so, when we appreciate that, when we consider that, we appreciate that this form of communication, God speaking to the people face to face is the language used in Deuteronomy, by its very nature was overwhelming. It was accompanied by physical and heavenly phenomena. We read in chapter 20 of Exodus in verse 18 of thunder and lightning, of the mountain and smoke. We read of how a trumpet sound was heard as we draw together the information that we have in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. This was a terrifying experience, a literally terrifying, awesome experience for the people, that the Creator of the heaven and the earth, the living and true God, should direct these words to them directly. And so, how do the people respond? Well, it's not surprising, as we appreciate the circumstances of this communication, they trembled with fear. They trembled with fear. What is the cause of their fear? Well, the most obvious cause is simply the awe that was generated in them in the face of such a terrifying experience. In a small measure, we can try and imagine what it would be like. And I say in a small measure because it's impossible to describe something like this in a way that we would fully appreciate what it would be like. But in a small measure, we can say, well, yes, of course they trembled with fear. Who would not tremble with fear in such a situation? The manner of the delivery of this message, the signs that accompanied it, all almost designed, you could say, to produce such a response. They trembled with fear. That certainly is an obvious cause of their fear. But I think we can also identify in the passage an additional and related cause of their fear. And that has to do not so much with the manner of delivery, but with the content of the message that is delivered. You see, not only are they impressed by the thunder and lightning, by the smoke, by the fire, by the phenomena, they are also impressed by the words, the words themselves, the content of what God says to them. They hear the words. And as they hear the words, as they hear what God commands them, they are convicted of their sinfulness. They are conscious that they have broken these commandments, that these are commandments that they have not been keeping. And they're conscious in the light of that, of their inability to stand before God and survive this face-to-face encounter with Him. They realize that their survival on this occasion, for they do indeed survive the experience, is something extraordinary. And the result, only of the gracious deliverance of God. Notice the language that is used there in Exodus, first of all, in verse 19, in the face of what they have experienced, they said to Moses,

Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us, or we will die. We can't handle this. We cannot survive in the face of this direct communication. In Deuteronomy, it's more explicit. And it's also more explicit how it's clear that they're conscious that having survived on this occasion, there was an extraordinary aspect to that that is unlikely to be repeated.

So, in Deuteronomy 5 and in verse 24 and 25, we read, And you said, The Lord our God has shown us His glory and His majesty, and we have heard His voice from the fire.

Today we have seen that a man can live, even if God speaks with him. There's a sense of wonder that this is so. But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer.

There is this amazement that they have survived, but there's also this consciousness that if they are to continue in God's presence any longer, then they will surely be consumed, for they are sinners before a holy God.

[12:54] So, they trembled with fear. Now, what has that got to say to us, of what interest is this to us, other than a curious interest in what happened so long ago?

We certainly have not had the message of the commandments as we've been considering them these past few months. We have not had the message accompanied by thunder and lightning. There's been no smoke, there's been no trumpets, there's been no great darkness. In a sense, it has been a lot less frightening for all of us, I imagine.

And yet, do we not believe that God Himself speaks in and through His Word? Yes, even to us and even today.

Do we not believe that the power to convict of the words, the content of God's revelation, that that power to convict is no different today than when it was first delivered in Horeb so long ago?

And so, ought there not also to be in us a measure of this response, that we too would tremble with fear as we are presented with a God's law?

[14:17] And so, I ask myself the question and I ask you the question, do we tremble? Are we convicted? Do we believe that God Himself is addressing us?

Or are we rather blasé and relaxed in the presence of God? Yes, we gather here in the presence of God and it's wonderful. Are we in need of experiencing something of the terrifying majesty and awesome glory of God that as we find described to us there or related to us in Exodus chapter 20, that the fear of God would serve to keep us from sinning?

Notice what we read there in verse 20 of chapter 20. Very interesting what Moses says there.

The fear of God, this reverence for God, this appreciation of His holiness and of His majesty and of His glory would keep you from sinning. Is that not something so needful for us, that we too would be kept from sinning as we appreciate who God is and as we are overcome by the fear of God?

So, this is the first response that we read of in the passage that they trembled with fear. But then we can identify a second response and it is this, that the people desire to know more and indeed to obey.

[16:06] In verse 19, we've already read it, they say to Moses, they've received directly from God the Ten Commandments and then they say to Moses, speak to us yourself and we will listen.

You see, the problem isn't that they don't want to hear what God has to say. They want to hear what God has to say. They're conscious that God has a lot more to say and they want to hear it. They just don't want to hear it directly from Him.

They're afraid of the consequences of that, but they are interested in knowing more. Again, in Deuteronomy, it's more clearly described for us.

In Deuteronomy chapter 5 and verse 27, there we read as follows. Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says.

This is the people speaking to Moses. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey.

[17:03] We will listen and obey. We want to hear. We're interested. We think it's important to hear what God has to say to us. We will listen to what God has to say. We will obey what God has to say.

But please, through you, Moses. But there is this desire. There is this willingness to listen and to obey.

Indeed, there in verse 27 of Deuteronomy chapter 5, the commitment to listen and to obey is an absolute one.

Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. Whatever He tells you. You know, whatever it is, however difficult, however demanding, whatever it is, that's okay.

Tell us. We will listen and we will obey. Well, as we think of ourselves, what about us? We have spent time considering the Decalogue.

[18:02] We have heard what God is saying to us in these Ten Commandments very particularly. I wonder, does it whet our appetite for more? Perhaps some might say, well, the Ten Commandments, we've heard it all before.

It's so familiar to us. And indeed. And so I ask you, well, does it whet your appetite for more? Do you, like the Israelites of old, say, I want to hear more. I want to discover more of what God has to say.

I want to hear. I want to listen. I want to know. Are we prepared as they were to listen and to obey? Will we turn to the Scriptures to study more?

Will we be dissatisfied with simply hearing for half an hour on a Sunday? Something of what we can discover. And that's enough for us until the following Lord's Day.

Or will we seek out the opportunities, the multiple opportunities that there are, to study more, to hear more, to discover more of what God would say to us? And are we, with the Israelites of old, prepared to listen and obey whatever God commands?

[19:10] You know, the word whatever has become very popular in our common parlance. And become very popular as an expression of detached disinterest. Whatever.

How many of you use that word? Whatever. Detached disinterest. It doesn't really matter. Whatever. But I ask you, what about this whatever? See, this whatever is a much more demanding whatever.

Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you, we will listen and obey. Do we rather prefer to pick and choose that which suits us, that is what is convenient to us, that which doesn't make us too uncomfortable?

We can learn from the Israelites as they respond to God presenting to them these ten commands. They desire to know more and to obey. But then there's another response, and it's very much intertwined with what we've already seen.

But we separate it simply to allow us to consider it by itself. But a third response is that they request a mediator.

[20:25] Now, we've already made reference to that. They need somebody to stand between them and God. Again, we don't need to dwell on this because as we've been reading the verses, it's come up time and time again.

Again, the experience of hearing God face to face has been so overwhelming that they're looking for somebody who will stand between them and God. They want to hear God, but they feel unable to hear Him face to face.

So they have a problem. They have a difficulty. They have a quandary. They need a mediator. They need somebody who will receive the Word of God and pass it on to them. Somebody who will stand in the breach for them.

Somebody who will mediate the voice of God for them. And of course, Moses is the man. Moses is the man. Moses is the man God has appointed. And Moses is the man that they approach and request that He would perform this role for them.

Now, I wonder, were they wrong to make this request? Is the request that they make an evidence of cowardice on the part of the people? If they had survived this first experience, why should they not boldly continue to hear God speaking to them face to face?

[21:37] Is this not something that they should have desired? Well, God gives us the answer whether this was a reasonable or a legitimate request on the part of the people. What do we read in Deuteronomy 5 in verse 28?

The Lord heard you when you spoke to me, making this request that I mediate. And the Lord said to me, I have heard what this people said to you.

Everything they said was good. They are commended for this request. It is deemed to be a legitimate request, a healthy request.

The people are vindicated by God Himself in this request that they make that Moses would deal directly with God. Moses would receive from God His message and bring it to them.

They do well to ask for a mediator. And as we have noticed, God says that everything they said was good. Well, again, as we bring this forward to ourselves, what about us?

[ 22 : 40 ] Well, of course, we know that we also need a mediator. And we know that God has provided that mediator in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Moses here serves as a type of Christ. But as such, he is only a shadow of the real thing. You see, Jesus is not only the bearer of the divine Word, not only the one who brings a Word from God for us.

He is, we are told, in Himself, the divine Word. He is the Word that became flesh. He is the one who stands in the breach in this particular matter of communicating the Word of God to us.

And we're going to notice in a moment that this role of mediator is multifaceted, and there's another aspect to it. But for the moment, simply to notice this, that as Moses performed this function of mediator in communicating God's Word, so Jesus, too, is God's Word for us.

And as we see Him, so we see and know the Father also. So the people, they tremble with fear, they desire to know more and to obey God's Word, they seek a mediator who would stand between them and God.

[ 24 : 00 ] And then we can say also this, and for this we fast forward somewhat, just a few days or weeks, we find them formally and consciously confirming their commitment to obey.

For that, if you just turn to Exodus chapter 24, and we'll read a few verses there in a moment. But before we do that, all that we have seen so far is the immediate reaction following this terrifying experience of hearing the very voice of God.

Now the question that I think would be instructive is, what about after they have been given time to recover and to ponder? You see, somebody in the heat of the moment is perhaps prone to say anything.

In the heat of this amazing encounter with God, while it is clear that the words that they speak are sincere and genuine, it's still worth asking, but what happened a little later on?

Do they maintain this commitment to hearing and to obeying God's Word? Is there any evidence of a lessening of their commitment to listen and obey? Well, to just fill in the gaps, as it were, Moses, as he had been requested by the people, has now heard more of God's law.

[ 25 : 20 ] And now, in the chapter that we're going to notice in chapter 24, he has returned to the camp to relay what he has heard to the people. And let's just take up the reading there in Exodus 24 and verse 3.

When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, he had gone to the mountain, he had been told, and now he brings this, he relays this information.

They responded, the people responded with one voice, everything the Lord has said, we will do.

Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Then he sent young Israelite men and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people. They responded, we will do everything the Lord has said. We will obey. Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, this is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

[ 26 : 28 ] Is there any lessening of their commitment? Any cooling of their determination to obey? By no means. Again they repeat, we will obey everything.

Far from a lessening of their commitment, we find that they are willing to consciously and formally commit themselves to covenant obedience. What we have read there in chapter 24 is a description of this covenant ceremony where the people commit themselves to their covenant overlord and commit themselves to obey his laws.

They have had time to think about it. They have had time to ponder it. They have had time to recover, at least in a measure, from this terrifying experience. And they say, no, we remain committed to obey everything that God would have us do.

And in this ceremony, there is the shedding and the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant over the people. Well, again, we ask the question, what of us?

You know, we can perhaps be moved by a sermon. We can, in the heat of the moment, mentally determine to repent and obey and say, well, yes, I'm going to stop sinning in this way or I'm going to be more careful concerning this commandment as we hear the challenge laid before us in God's Word.

[ 27 : 45 ] But then the moment passes. We are into the busyness and the routine of the week. And do we then forget? Unwilling to formally and seriously commit to a life of obedience.

To do, in the words of the people here, to do everything the Lord has said. If we are conscious that we are guilty of that, then we can learn from the response of the Israelites.

But there is one final response I want to just briefly notice in how the people respond to the Decalogue, to this communication by God of His law to them.

And for that, we need to jump a couple of pages further to chapter 32 of Exodus. Before we just notice the first verse, and it's only the first verse we need to notice.

So far, it's all been good. But there always seems to be a but. You see, as we follow the sequence of what is happening, following this ceremony of covenant commitment that's described in chapter 24, there is another experience of an encounter with God that involves not only Moses, but a representative group of the leaders of Israel.

[ 29 : 03 ] That's described for us in chapter 24, and verses 9 to 11. Moses and Aaron, Nephthali and Abihu, and the 70 elders of Israel, went up and saw the God of Israel.

And it continues. And after this, Moses is again summoned to meet with God alone for 40 days and for 40 nights. And then what happens?

Well, we know the sorry answer. But again, as we just recap, everything has been going so well. The response of the Israelites thus far is exemplary, convicted of sin, hungry and thirsty for God's Word, conscious of their need of a mediator, commended by God.

They commit themselves formally to wholesale obedience. And yet, we then read the first verse of chapter 32. When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, Come, make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. They mess up big time. They'd been doing so well, and here they mess up big time.

[ 30 : 20 ] Where did this come from? From such exemplary commitment to such crass and rebellious idolatry, how did this happen? Were their previous expressions of commitment just words, hypocritical?

I don't think so. I don't think we have any reason to question the sincerity of all that we have seen thus far. There seemed to be so many reasons not to do what they do.

They themselves had heard the words of God concerning the making of idols just a few weeks before. They had seen the signs and wonders that accompanied the voice of God. They could even, as they asked Aaron to make the idols, even as they asked, they could glance up to the mountain and see the cloud symbolizing the presence of God.

The very morning on which they asked Aaron to make these idols, that very morning they had gathered manna, an expression of God's generous provision for them.

And yet why do they do what they do? How to explain? You know, in a sense, there is no reasonable or satisfactory explanation. Sin is like that.

[ 31 : 29 ] Sin is irrational. It is random. It is anarchic. There is no reasonable explanation for sin and rebellion. And yet as we draw things to a close, and before we judge too harshly, what about ourselves?

You have committed yourself to God. Some of you, just a couple of weeks ago, participated in the Lord's Supper, and there together we drank the blood of the covenant shed for us, the wine that symbolizes the shed blood of Jesus on our behalf.

And yet, you continue to sin, and I continue to sin. We continue to grumble against God. We are oblivious to the clear signs of His presence and His generous provision.

Not so different to the Israelites of old. I wonder, was there any hope for this foolish and stiff-necked people as God Himself describes them? Well, listen to what God has to say on this matter.

Again, there in chapter 32 of Exodus and verses 9 and 10, I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses. They are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.

[ 32 : 43 ] Then I will make you into a great nation. This is what they deserve. And who is instrumental in delivering them from this just punishment? Well, here again, their mediator comes to the fore.

Moses, Moses, who serves in this capacity as a mediator between the people and God, he addresses God. He intercedes for the people. In verse 11 of chapter 32, But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God.

O Lord, he said, why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? And he goes on as he intercedes for the people before God. Having served as a mediator, relaying the word of God to the people, now he serves as a mediator in the other direction, interceding before God on behalf of the people.

And again, as we think of ourselves, how we need such a mediator. Not only one who will bring us the word of God in a manner that we can understand and that we will not be consumed by, but also one who intercedes for us before the throne.

[ 33 : 57 ] One who sits for us at the very right hand of God, interceding for us. We have such a mediator. We have in Jesus Christ, the one foreshadowed by Moses, one who intercedes for us, poor, rebellious, stubborn sinners.

As we close, how to respond to the word of God? How to respond to the Decalogue? How to respond to these ten commandments that we have been thinking about? Well, let us humbly learn from the Israelites.

Let us certainly tremble with fear. May we desire with them to know more and to obey. Let us thank God for the mediator He has provided. May we consciously and formally recommit ourselves to obey everything God commands us.

And may we, when we mess up as we do, rest in the merits of our mediator as we cry to God for mercy and forgiveness in the name and resting on the merits of Jesus Christ, our mediator.

Let us pray. Amen. Amen.