



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 12, 2010
Released on Wednesday, September 8, 2010**

"God's Covenant with Israel"

Lesson Text: Exodus 20:1-11

Background Scripture: Exodus 20

Devotional Reading: Psalm 111:1-10

Exodus 20:1-11

- 1 And God spake all these words, saying,
- 2 I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
- 3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
- 4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
- 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;
- 6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.
- 7 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.
- 8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- 9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:
- 10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:
- 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to study how God makes Himself known to His people through a covenant with His people Israel.

Principle: to show that our God is a covenant-keeping God like no other.

Application: to affirm that God gives us His rules for our blessing and always keeps His side of the bargain.

INTRODUCTION

Life with Limits

Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites were set free from 400 years of bondage in Egypt. But what did that freedom mean for them? How were they to exercise it? Some three months after the exodus, God brought the people to Mount Sinai. There He gave them His laws. Were the Israelites being ushered into another kind of bondage by being told how they had to live from day to day? Some who see any kind of moral restriction or limit as confining might say yes. However, learning to obey God is not the pathway to bondage. It is the "trail" to true freedom.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: 1445 B.C.

Place: Mount Sinai

Following their dramatic deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites were led by Moses to Mount Sinai. That accorded with the "token" or sign that God had provided to Moses when He first spoke to him from the burning bush (Exodus 3:12). Traditionally the location of Mount Sinai is believed to be at the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula.

A primary purpose for taking the people to such a setting seems to have been to provide a kind of "retreat" environment. There God's people could be separated from distractions and could focus on what He had to say. (Even so, as we will see in next week's study, such a setting did not guarantee that sin would not wreak havoc among the people.)

Exodus 19:1 tells us it was in the third month following the exodus that the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai. Moses went up the mountain, where God gave him a message to relay to the people. That included His desire to establish a special covenant with them (vs. 5,6). When Moses returned and delivered the message, the people responded with the promise "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (v. 8).

Then Moses again climbed the mountain, and the Lord told him that He himself would come to the people. The Lord gave special instructions as to how the people must prepare for such a sacred occasion—instructions which Moses relayed to the people (Exodus 19:9–15). On the third day after the Lord had spoken to Moses (vs. 10,11), the people witnessed a spectacular display of both sights and sounds, indicating God's mighty presence on the mountain.

God then spoke to Moses and commanded him to climb to the top of the mountain. As Moses began to ascend, God sent him back to the people to warn them not to go beyond the barrier that had been set at the foot of the mountain. Moses came down and conveyed this message. At this point, it appears that the Lord himself spoke to the people the Ten Commandments; for after the commandments were given, the people begged for only Moses to speak to them (Exodus 20:19; see also Deuteronomy 4:12, 13). Thus Moses was also listening as God issued the commandments. This was appropriate, for he was as responsible to obey them as any other Israelite.

THE ONLY GOD (Exodus 20:1-6)

1. What two kinds of treaties have been found in ancient records, and which did God use as a pattern for His covenant with Israel?

The findings of archaeologists have revealed that in ancient days there were two kinds of treaties in the world. One was called a parity treaty. In it two parties of equal status agreed on similar or identical obligations. The other was called a suzerainty treaty. In this type a king spelled out the duties and obligations of his servants or vassals. There are some similarities between that kind of treaty and what God presented to Israel as His expectations of them in the law.

A suzerainty treaty always began with the master identifying himself. That is what we find in Exodus 20:2. The fact that verse 1 specifically states that God spoke all the words that follow assures us that Moses did not copy ideas or instructions from any previously established treaty. These were God's instructions meant for His chosen people.

The next part of a suzerainty treaty usually consisted of the master explaining all the good things he had done for the people, giving a basis for his expectations of them. This is what God did in mentioning that He had brought the people out of Egypt and their previous bondage. Egypt had been a land of slavery for them—a slavery so severe that they had cried out desperately to God for deliverance.

He had heard their cries, and through the leadership of Moses and Aaron, liberated them. They were now free.

2. What was the basis for God's expectations of Israel? (Exodus 20:1-2)

Before God gives the Ten Commandments, He establishes His authority to give those rules: *I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt.* God's powerful actions establish the powerful authority of His words.

With this reminder as a basis for His next instructions, it was clear that after His wonderful deliverance on their behalf, God had the right to expect submission and obedience in return. His first instruction was that He was to be their only God and that they were never to accept or worship any false gods. This would include every form of idolatry and polytheism. Egypt had multitudes of gods and totally captivated by idolatrous worship. Israel was to avoid adopting or taking with them any of these ideas or systems of worship.

3. What command did God give regarding worship? (vs. 3-4a)

Our allegiance must be directed toward only one God—the true God. Other gods are mentioned not because they exist, but because the idea of worshiping them will be a temptation to God's people (a temptation to which they will yield all too frequently). Because God alone is "I Am" (Exodus 3:14), any other supposed god or goddess automatically "is not" (compare Jeremiah 2:11).

This commandment concerns the "how" of worship: God is not to be represented by *any likeness* of any being anywhere in the created world. Thus idolatry is forbidden. As Moses later will recall when addressing the Israelites on the verge of entering the Promised Land, "The Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice" (Deuteronomy 4:12). God reveals himself to the Israelites primarily through His Word; to construct an idol is to draw the people's focus away from that Word.

The worship of God was to be spiritual rather than material. The Israelites were not to make any carved images to represent God. They were not to worship idol; nor were they to make images of Him. The Hebrew word that has been translated "graven" is *pesel*. This word is derived from the primitive root *pasal*, which specifically refers to something that was carved out of wood or stone.

4. Why did God go into detail regarding making no images for their worship? (vs. 4b,5a)

God was adamantly clear that He did not want Israel to make any material representation of Him. There was no way such representation could be accurate. He spelled it out to them in detail, just to be certain they understood. They were not to make any image based on things in heaven above or on earth beneath. This would include stars, planets, birds, and perhaps even angels, all of which occupy the heavens. Nor were they to make images of animals, insects, or creeping things. Nor were they to make images of fish.

God was communicating to them that He simply cannot be adequately represented by anything man can see; so they should avoid trying to do so. The use of such idols would be misleading and cause them to have wrong concepts and, therefore, wrong practices. His command was clear: "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them" (Exod. 20:5). This is the logical follow-up to the first command, in which God said they should not have any god besides Him. Making images would lead them into disobeying that first command.

The study of idolatry in the Old Testament is enlightening. A number of the prophets repeatedly warned the Israelites about practicing this false religious system. Their emphasis was most often about the complete inability of idols to help in any way because they were man-made and had no power of their own. They could not see, hear, or speak, and they had to be carried in order to move from place to place!

5. What would be the consequence of idolatry and the influence on future generations? (vs. 5b,6)

The Lord demanded full and exclusive devotion, i.e. He is "a jealous God." Jealousy is usually considered a negative quality, so how can it be descriptive of God's character? Here jealousy is used in a positive manner to describe the high degree of God's love and concern for His people. God desires the allegiance of His people to Him and to no other gods. This is not for selfish reasons (which we often associate with jealousy), but because He knows that this kind of allegiance is best for His people.

When people turn to idolatry, the proper worship of God is jeopardized. When one generation turns from God, the generations that follow will be affected. Whatever children see their parents and other influential adults do, they will be inclined to imitate.

Deuteronomy 24:16 states, "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin." God's pronouncement about "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Exod. 20:5) is not an announcement of direct punishment but a warning concerning the natural influence that parents have on children.

John MacArthur wrote this insightful comment: "The difference in consequence served as both a warning and a motivation. The effect of a disobedient generation was to plant wickedness so deeply that it took several generations to reverse." Further motivation should come from the truth that God, by contrast, shows mercy to thousands who love Him and obey Him.

GOD'S NAME AND THE SABBATH (Exodus 20:7-11)

6. What did God command about His name? (v. 7)

This commandment deals with another facet of reverence for God: how we talk about Him. The term "vain" refers to taking God's name lightly, which can be done through profanity or cursing but is certainly not limited to that.

For the Israelites, this commandment may also prohibit using God's name in ways in which the pagans use the names of their deities—to cause harm to others (by casting spells, for example) or to try to manipulate Him to comply with their wishes.

"And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations" (3:14-15).

It is obvious that when God told Moses the name he was to use with the people of Israel, He meant it to cause a sense of wonder, amazement, and hope; it was to reassure Israel that He was indeed present and coming to their assistance. It is sad that in our day there is often little or no respect for God's name. Any time the Lord's name is used casually or carelessly with little or no reverence in mind constitutes a violation of this commandment. Examples are the oft-heard exclamation "Oh, my God!" and its shortened version "OMG."

We as believers need to be especially careful about this as we endeavor to counteract the world and be a testimony to them.

7. Why was the Sabbath to be a special day of rest? Who was expected to benefit from the rest on the Sabbath Day? (vs. 8-10)

This is not the first time the Sabbath was named as a holy day. God had prepared the people for this observance in His instructions on how to collect manna (Exodus 16:21-23). When God gave Israel manna, every day they were to gather just enough for that day's use (16:15-19). On the sixth day, however, they were to gather enough for two days, for there would be no manna on the seventh day. "Tomorrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the Lord: bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning" (v. 23).

The Sabbath Day was to be held as a day set apart from the other days of the week. All work was to be done on the other six days. The Hebrew word for "Sabbath" is *shabbath*, which means "to repose" or "desist from exertion." It is clear from these definitions that the Sabbath Day was to be viewed as a day of rest. This was to include every person and every animal – parents, children, male and female servants, animals, and visitors or guests.

The regulations concerning this commandment must be understood in light of ancient Israel's being an agricultural society rather than a modern industrialized one. As any farmer will attest, farming is truly a full-time activity. It is easy to justify working every day because there is always some job or task that needs to be addressed.

Time is a gift from God. Like all of His other gifts, it must be used according to the giver's guidelines in order to be enjoyed to the fullest extent. The commandment recognizes that work is also a gift of God, but it must be balanced by an appropriate time of rest.

8. With what did God connect His command to rest on the Sabbath? (v.11)

God connected His command for rest on the Sabbath with His rest on the day after Creation. For God, this was a symbolic rest; He had no need for the kind of rest required by our bodies. That God rested simply means that He ceased His creative activity. But in doing this He sanctified the seventh day and set Israel apart from other peoples. Therefore, God bases the observance of the Sabbath day on the fact that in six days He accomplished the work of creation, and then *rested the seventh day*.

Keeping the Sabbath recognizes God's activity in creating Heaven and earth and everything within them, and it also honors His activity in creating His people Israel and establishing His special covenant with them.

What Do You Think?

How should we include the principle of Sabbath-rest in our lives?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Occupations that require working seven days per week
- Occupations that require work on Sunday
- What does and does not count as rest
- Genesis 2:2, 3; 2 Corinthians 7:5; Colossians 2:16, 17; Revelation 14:11

CONCLUSION

Respect the Law

Today, the Old Testament law by which the ancient Israelites were to live is treated frequently like the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield: "it gets no respect." This is because in many people's thinking the Old Testament law is set against the concept of grace. It is true that Christ's work of grace served to blot "out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:14). Even so, we must take care not to treat the Old Testament law unfairly.

We start by considering what the law was intended to mean to the ancient Israelite. Most ancient peoples worshiped gods and goddesses that were seen to be capricious and unpredictable in their behavior. Such gods demonstrated no consistency in their requirements and often left worshipers groping in the dark, as it were, for any kind of stability.

How different was Israel's God! Here was a God who wanted to establish a covenant relationship with His people. Here was a God who was not unpredictable,

but refreshingly consistent in His actions and expectations. The Israelites were not left groping in the dark as to what God required. His laws were clear, and obedience to them was designed to enhance His people's witness to the nations around them (see Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

This is why we read, particularly in the Psalms, of such a deep and passionate appreciation for the law of the Lord. Psalm 119 is especially outstanding in expressing that appreciation. Nearly every one of the 176 verses in that psalm contains some reference to the law of God. Consider, for example, the words of verse 97: "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day."

How is it possible to *love* the Old Testament law? It is possible because the ancient Israelites were supposed to understand that God had done for them what no other god of any other people had done—spoken His words clearly and plainly. When He spoke, it was with only the best and noblest of intentions for the people with whom He had established His covenant (see Psalm 147:19,20).

When we read the Old Testament laws today, we can give thanks for the better covenant of grace that we have in the cross of Christ (Hebrews 7:22). But we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the concept of grace is absent from the Old Testament. The law itself was a wonderful gift of grace to God's people of the Old Testament era. "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Psalm 119:103).

PRAYER

Thank You, Father, for the gracious gift of Your commandments. Even as followers of Jesus in the New Testament era, we can receive timeless instructions from them. May we declare, "I seek thy precepts" (Psalm 119:45). We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God's laws liberate.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**God's Hatred of Idolatry**" and will show how the people of Israel strayed from God to idols. In preparation, study Exodus 32:1-35.

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