

Obeying God's Law

Bible Background • [EXODUS 20](#)
Printed Text • [EXODUS 20:18-26](#)
Devotional Reading • [PSALM 119:49-64](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EXPLORE the divine manifestations and warnings that accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments; ASPIRE to live in more perfect obedience to God's laws; and SHARE one way to show God that we are serious about obeying His laws.



Stephan and Carmella were married right out of school and rented a walk-up apartment near Carmella's parents' brownstone. After four years of hard work and saving what they could, they decided it was time to buy their first home. They found a charming row house in their neighborhood and set off to see the loan officer at the neighborhood bank.

"Banks are imposing, and bankers intimidate me," Stephan told Carmella the morning of their appointment. "Don't worry," Carmella replied, "we are also meeting my uncle who studied law, and he can help us understand the documents and explain our rights and obligations. As for the bank building, those marble columns, high ceilings, and ornate wooden desks are all meant to assure us that the bank is solid, stable, and invested in our community." Excited, yet a bit apprehensive, Stephan held Carmella's hand tightly as they walked through the massive brass and glass doors of the local bank.

On their way back to their apartment, Stephan commented, "I feel so much better. The people at the bank were respectful and were willing to trust us with this loan. Let's pray together right now that God will help us to honor our part in this, and that He will enable us to show that their trust in us is well placed."

Describe a time when someone didn't do their part to honor an agreement. In this lesson, we will find out how the Israelites were called to honor their covenant agreement with God.

Keep in Mind

"In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee" (from [Exodus 20:24](#)).

KJV

Exodus 20:18 And all the people saw the thundering, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.

19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

20 And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.

21 And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.

22 And the LORD said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

23 Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold.

24 An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and they peace offering, they sheep, and thine oxen: In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

25 And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up they tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.

26 Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.

NLT

Exodus 20:18 When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram's horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear.

19 And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!"

20 "Don't be afraid," Moses answered them, "for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of him will keep you from sinning!"

21 As the people stood in the distance, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

22 And the LORD said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: You saw for yourselves that I spoke to you from heaven.

23 Remember, you must not make any idols of silver or gold to rival me.

24 Build for me an altar made of earth, and offer your sacrifices to me—your burnt offerings and peace offerings, your sheep and goats, and your cattle. Build my altar whenever I cause my name to be remembered, and I will come to you and bless you.

25 If you use stones to build my altar, use only natural, uncut stones. Do not shape the stones with a tool, for that would make the altar unfit for holy use.

26 And do not approach my altar by going up steps. If you do, someone might look up under steps. If you do, someone might look up under your clothing and see your nakedness.

The People, Places, and Times

Moses. Moses plays a prominent role in the events of this passage. Born a Hebrew slave, Moses was raised in the home of the Pharaoh. As a young man, he witnessed a fellow Hebrew being unjustly beaten, so he reacted by killing the attacker. So, he had to flee to Midian where he married and raised a family. Some years later, God chose Moses to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. In the process, God shaped and molded Moses into His faithful servant who became an outstanding leader of His people.

Mount Sinai. The events of this passage take place at Mount Sinai, often referred to as “the mountain of God.” It is believed by some to be located about fifty miles north of the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, in an area now controlled by Egypt. On this mountain, Moses met God in the burning bush, and here God called Moses to go to Egypt and lead His people out of slavery (Exodus 3). Many years later, the prophet Elijah would return to this mountain (which is also called Horeb) and hear from God in the gentle whisper of a still, small voice ([1 Kings 19:8–13](#)).

How would you evaluate Moses’ relationship with God? Did God direct Moses’ life in ways that helped Moses mature and become the leader that He needed?

Background

The events of this Scripture take place in the third month after God had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. For nearly three months, a vast multitude of men, women, and children had been slowly moving across formidable deserts. All the miraculous events that God had ordained in Egypt, including the night of the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea, were certainly still fresh in their minds. In the past few months, they had seen the presence of God in the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. They had been miraculously fed by the manna and quail. God had provided water when none was to be found. The Israelites were constantly aware of the presence and power of God in their midst. Now they were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God would once again show His mighty power and give the Law to His people through their leader Moses. Through the process, the people would learn more about God and what He expected of them.

How would you evaluate the importance of the Ten Commandments in the lives of the Israelites, as well as all modern-day believers?

In Depth

1. God Makes His Presence Known ([Exodus 20:18](#))

For three months, God had made His presence known through miraculous physical phenomenon such as the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He led them to stop at Mount Sinai, where He would give His people the Law.

The Israelites' stopping at Mount Sinai mirrors what happens in a believer's life. We worship the Lord and come to know who He is before we are given commands to obey. The Law outlined how they were expected to live as His people in relationship with Him and in relationship with each other. They were expected to fulfill these covenant requirements. This is in line with the commands that Jesus put forth as the first and second greatest commandments for us—to love God and to love people.

It was important for God to make sure His people knew that it was He, Almighty God, the God of their fathers, who was giving the Law. So He used spectacular divine manifestations to cause them to respond in fear and reverence to keep their covenant commitment. He used smoke, thunder, the sound of heavenly trumpets, and lightning. God's manifestation of His presence had the desired effect. The presence of God and the recognized authorship of His commands also causes us to reverence God, receive His words, and obey them.

What has caused you to fear and revere God lately?

2. The People Show Reverent Fear (vv. 19–21)

The people withdrew in fear, knowing that they were truly in the presence of Almighty God. Yet Moses told them, “Fear not, for God is come to prove you” (v. 20). What Moses was telling them was that they should not withdraw from God in terror; God intended to use this experience to instill in them a reverent awe of Him. It was as if God were saying, “I want you to know I really mean business here!” Thus, “fear of the LORD” would prompt His people to want to keep the Law, and never sin.

God also used the divine manifestations to underscore the importance of His commands that He would be their only God, and that they were never to make any idols. After all they had seen, heard, and experienced, it is hard to imagine that any of the Israelites would ever consider following any other god! They had heard His voice and seen His power, yet they had not seen Him in any physical shape or form. But God knows the fragility of human nature, and no matter how many times they experienced God's miracles and presence, they turned to idols. It is the same way with us. We often forget who God is and turn to less-than-satisfactory idols.

What motivates you to modify your behavior and respond to God in obedience?

3. God Encourages Worship (vv. 22–26)

Finally, God gave instructions on the building of altars to be used in worship. While this command seems unusual for us, it was fitting for the culture of the time. From the beginning,

God has always desired worship, and at that time worship included sacrifices and burnt offerings. What God wanted to make clear with the commands of verses 24–26 was that the altars were to be temporary and portable. They were not yet in the Promised Land, and their focus was to be on the object of their worship rather than the place of their sacrifice. The stones were to be unhewn, perhaps so that no one would be tempted to carve the stones into some image or idol. And the altars were not to have steps leading up to them, so that their sacrifices would be made in humility and modesty. Again, the focus was then, and is now, on the object of our worship, not on the means, place, or structure.

How and where can we create opportunities to worship God in addition to Saturday and Sunday worship service?

Search the Scriptures

1. Moses says that God appeared in the way He did so that the people would not sin ([Exodus 20:20](#)). How does God's presence keep us from sinning?
2. Why did God want them to make an altar of unhewn stone (v. 25)?

Discuss the Meaning

In this Scripture, we learn a lot about God, His power, and His desire for us to live in obedience and fellowship with Him. What can we do to achieve and keep a proper attitude of awe, reverence, fear, and love for Him?

Lesson in Our Society

Places such as banks, courtrooms, and churches are intentionally built to inspire awe, respect, and even proper fear in us. And in those places, we often enter into agreements where we make certain promises and receive certain privileges. The awe, respect, and fear generated by our surroundings, as well as our faith in God, should prompt us to live up to the promises we have made, and joyfully comply with agreements in which we have entered. In this way, we will enjoy more blessings and peace in our relationship with God and with our neighbors.

Some years ago, Tavis Smiley helped to develop a book titled *The Covenant with Black America*. The book outlines strategies for the betterment of the African American community. This book addresses the problem on a structural level, but there also could be a solution to improving the African American community on a personal level. We need to tackle some of the weightier economic, educational, and health issues that plague our communities.

At the same time, we also need to fear God and treat Him with reverence and respect. We need to live up to the agreements we have made in our churches, businesses, and relationships.

How can we prioritize our relationship with God and seek to improve our dealings with others?

Make It Happen

God's greatness and awesomeness compel us to honor our commitment to Him. Here are some ways we can remember to honor Him and what He has done in our lives:

- Go outdoors and look up at the sky to remind yourself of the greatness of God.
- Bring a special offering in thanksgiving to God.
- Spend time each morning reading God's Word and writing down a Bible verse on a card that you take with you.

More Light on the Text

Exodus 20:18–26

18 And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.

The people of Israel witnessed the visible and audible manifestation of God's presence on the mountain. Thunder and lightning were typical signs associated with ancient Near Eastern gods of the time, but the difference is that usually these were seen in battle. On this occasion, God revealed Himself to people, which was unheard of in the narratives of the gods at the time.

The Children of Israel are now in the presence of God! Their reaction shows that this manifestation of God's presence was something far from the ordinary. The lightning they see and thunder they hear cause them to be in awe, which is expressed in their removing themselves and standing back from the mountain.

19 And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. 20 And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.

They call out to Moses and ask that he would speak to them instead of Yahweh. Their reason is that they could bear to hear Moses' words, but hearing Yahweh made them feel as though they would die.

Moses assures them and tells them not to be afraid. Although they should have a healthy fear of Yahweh—which is respect—Moses encourages the Israelites that they do not have to fear that they will die from hearing God's voice. The purpose of Yahweh's presence on the mountain is to prove (Heb. *nasah*, nah-SAH) them. This word is from a root word which means to smell or test by the smell. In this context, it means to ascertain the nature of something, including any faults or imperfections. The Lord wants the people to fear Him in a healthy way so that their lives would be free from sin.

21 And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was. 22 And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

The people are still described as standing “afar off” as Moses draws near to God. The “thick darkness” is one word in the Hebrew (’arapel, ah-rah-FELL). It should be distinguished from just the opposite of light. The thick darkness described here is similar to a cloud of smoke, gas, or dust. This could refer to storm clouds which would accompany the thunder and the lightning mentioned previously. This also aligns with the fact that the mountain was emitting smoke.

The presence of the Almighty was a mystery to most Israelites, but Moses enters into the darkness to hear from God. As he approaches God for the people, Moses acts as mediator. First, he goes to the Lord to hear from Him, then the Lord commands Moses to go to the people and speak to them. Moses is told to let them know that God has spoken to them “from heaven,” in order to assure them that the words come from God even though Moses is delivering them.

23 Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. 24 An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

The Lord again warns against making idols, but the wording is very specific. He warns them not to make any idols “with me,” meaning that they could not worship God along with other gods. He wants their exclusive allegiance. Nothing else must share in the worship due to Him.

He also informs Moses that an altar of earth is required in order to make sacrifices to Him. This was most likely intended to foster humility in worship. The Israelites would not be tempted to focus on the monuments they made for worship, but on God alone. Many altars from the region were known to have been constructed of mud bricks, although no Israelite altars of this sort have been found.

25 And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. 26 Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.

These verses warn against two things. First of all, if an altar is made of stone, then it must not be “hewn” stone. No work was to be done to shape or cut it. If any work was done on the altar to cut or shape it, then it would be polluted (Heb. chalal, kha-LOL). This word means more than just physically dirtying someone or something; it means to defile the sacred character of someone or something, to treat it as common rather than showing the honor it deserves.

The second thing that the Lord commands Moses to tell the people is not go up steps to the altar. This was to ensure modesty among the people. In contrast to the surrounding nations, the Israelites would not go up steps to the altar to expose themselves. Ritual nudity was a common practice for pagan worshipers of the surrounding nations, and God wanted absolute holiness when it came to His people’s worship practices.

Say It Correctly

Hewn. HEE-yoon.

Altar. AL-ter.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

People Hear God Speak the Commandments
([Deuteronomy 5:22–27](#))

TUESDAY

God's Exclusive Claim
([Exodus 20:1–12](#))

WEDNESDAY

Guide for Human Relationships
([Exodus 20:13–17](#))

THURSDAY

The Law Finds Fulfillment in Jesus
([Matthew 5:17–20](#))

FRIDAY

Anger Leads to Murder
([Matthew 5:21–26](#))

SATURDAY

Lust Leads to Adultery
([Matthew 5:27–32](#))

SUNDAY

People Hear God's Word from Moses
([Exodus 20:18–26](#))