

“Holiness”

Exodus 20:18-26 Presence #4

February 23 – 24, 2019



MAIN THOUGHT:

“If the sense of being naked before other humans is terrifying, what is it like to be completely exposed in the presence of the awesome holiness of God?”

What’s the proper response when someone gives you a set of commands? How should you respond when someone tells you what to do? If you’re in the military, I suppose that the proper response is “Sir, yes sir!” If you’re talking to your king, it’s more like “As you wish, m’lord.”

But how do we actually respond? If your boss tells you something, you may respond with a polite smile and a nod of your head, but an inner sigh. If your teacher tells you what to do, you may immediately shoot up your hand and begin to bargain: “But what about this? Can we have an extra day?” If your friend (or, heaven forbid, your sibling) tells you what to do, you may say, “You’re not the boss of me!”, or just haul off and whack him in the stomach! When you parents give commands (and we all have to), you may be met with vacant stares, or perhaps the sort of look that communicates to other siblings, “I believe that she is trying to say something—maybe to you, but not to me.”

What do you do when someone gives you an instruction? And how do you respond when God is the one giving it? We know that Exodus 20 is one of the high points of the Bible, but we usually stop at, “You shall not covet...” We don’t often go on to verses 18 and following. So, now what? What happened? God didn’t just drop down leaflets from heaven, saying “Here’s ten commandments!” He spoke to Moses and the people. They were there. They saw, heard, and experienced this.

Remember, the Israelites have already been delivered, so the response that we’re going to see is not: “Alright, we need to try much harder if we want God to help us get out of Egypt.” No, they made their cry known, and God heard it and sent a deliverer. Before the Ten Commandments, of his own sovereign good pleasure and power, he set them free. Thus, we see the gospel (the good news of deliverance by God), followed by the law in the giving of the Ten Commandments.

So again, we ask the question: “So what?” In this section of scripture, it is obvious the proper response to God’s commandments is two-fold: fear and worship—but not just any sort of fear or every sort of worship. God is looking for a certain kind of fear, and he expects a certain kind of worship.

THE FIRST ELEMENT OF THE PROPER RESPONSE TO THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IS FEAR. Look at what they experienced in verse 18: thunder, flashes of lightning, the sound of a trumpet, and a mountain smoking. This engages most (if not all) of their senses. They see something, hear something, and even (through the smoke filling the air) touch, smell, or taste something. This is the language of a theophany (a “God appearing”).

To fear God means that he is not to be trifled with, or taken lightly, careless, casually, or flippantly. It’s the difference between riding your bike down a muddy, waterless creek and trying to ride your bike off the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. The fear of God means that God is big. He’s not a joke. He’s not playing games. He’s not a therapist or Santa Claus. He’s not a tame lion! He’s not to be trifled with.

People in our culture are spiritual people. They like to talk and think about God. But how often do they really contemplate, let alone grasp, the full God-ness of God? When people announce that they want to have a real, close, intimate relationship with God, I immediately think, “Well, how are you going to get that?” They think, “Well, I’ll just come to God. Maybe he’s a little lonely. He’ll be so happy for me to come and talk to him. When I pray, he’s like, ‘Oh, yes, you’re here! I’ve been waiting for you!’ He’s my best friend. He’s so cool to hang out with.

Have you ever thought, “If only God would speak to me directly. If only I could hear his voice. If only I could have an experience that they seem to have all the time in the Bible”? Are you sure that’s what you want? The Israelites had a little bit of that—just enough to say, “Moses, you talk to him or we’re going to be dead!” Look at verse 20...

“Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.” Exodus 20:20

There must be a kind of fear that we ought not to have when approaching God, and another that we ought never to lack when approaching him. That’s why I said that this verse gets to the very heart of what it means to follow God. We have to be able to deal with these two categories. God doesn’t want a fear that keeps us away. He wants a fear that brings us close, very carefully. That’s the difference.

God doesn’t want you to be afraid. As we will see in a moment, worship is drawing near, so the opposite of worship is to stand far off. He says, “Don’t be afraid. I don’t want you to back away from me. I want to dwell with you and be near you. But this is not going to be a thing lightly done or trifled with. Intimacy? Yes. Carelessness? No.”

The purpose of this fear is so that you may not sin. Obedience, as a category in the Christian life, does not disappear when we’re saved by grace. Some people act as though, since we’re saved by grace, we never have to talk about obedience. You’re going to have a hard time making sense of the Bible that way. Israel was saved by grace when they were delivered out of Egypt. They were given the law after the gospel. Now God says, “I want you to follow me.”

THE SECOND RESPONSE IS WORSHIP — but not just any kind of worship. It’s worship on God’s terms. Verse 22 begins what scholars call “the covenant code”, which runs through the end of chapter 23. Then there’s a covenant renewal in chapter 24.

We tend to think that worship is measured by how we feel as we worship: “How was worship today? Well, how did I feel when I was singing? How did I feel when I was listening to the sermon?” Actually, though, worship is measured by how God feels as we worship. What does

God think about our worship? It's good for us to be sincere and have experiences in worship, but God's experience as we worship is far more important than yours.

The worship of God should be intimate, but never casual. By casual, understand that I'm not talking about attire, but about attitude. We live in a culture of almost militant informality. This has a great leveling effect, which can be both good and bad. We struggle to even have categories to apprehend the weight, glory, heaviness, and otherness of God. We think that it's all sort of level, and we should all be able to go where we want, come as we are, and do what we please. It's one of the hardest things for us relatively well-off, rights-focused, entitlement- assuming Americans to grasp: we cannot approach God in any way we want.

Here's the good news. Worship is not only on his terms but is according to his provision. He condescends to speak to us. God reveals himself on every page of Scripture, and we scarcely realize what an act of gracious condescension it is—that the God who makes mountains smoke and tremble would deign to speak to us, and we can know him! In verse 19, the people say, "Moses, you speak to us." In verse 22, God says, "I have spoken to you, people." In verse 21, the people are standing far off, but Moses is drawing near. He will be the intercessor. God provides the revelation, the intercession, and the atonement.

Worship is drawing near to God. How do you draw near to him when very sound of his voice makes you want to tremble, cower, and turn away in servile fear? How do you approach this God with the right kind of fear? Here's how: God says, in effect, "You're standing far off, but through the provision of this altar, I will draw near to you and bless you." Do you see that in verse 24?

In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. Exodus 20:24b

Worship is God's way, but the good news is that he makes a way. What are you going to do with the Ten Commandments? You're going to try to keep them in fear of the Lord, and you are going to break them. You need an altar—a place where sacrifices can be burnt to atone for your sins. See how gracious God already is at the very beginning of this set of instructions. He says, "Here's what I'm going to do for you: I'm going to make a way for you, because I know what you're like and what you're going to do." Ultimately, we'll see that we now need no more altars, because Christ himself was that sacrifice once and for all, so that Paul (in Romans 12) will say, "You know what sacrifice you need to give now? The sacrifice of your own life—not to atone for your sins, but to follow hard after God."

Worship is according to God's terms and according to God's provision. The language in verse 24 ought to jog your memory: **"...I will cause my name to be remembered..."** When you hear "remember", you should start thinking, "That's covenant language." "I remembered my covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." What does it mean to remember the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Essentially, that covenant promised one fundamental thing: "I'll bless you, and I'll bless those who bless you." So, verse 24 says, **"I will cause my name to be remembered. As you remember my covenant, I will remember my covenant. The promises of Abraham will be yours, and I will bless you."**

This kind of fear (Awe-Respect) leads to blessing. It's the lie of the devil to think that fear of God leads to slavery, and it's the promise of the gospel that fear leads to blessing. We see in these two little sections what the Christian life is about: to fear and worship God. He calls the shots, because he makes it possible.

POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR LIFE GROUPS

1. Based on this section of scripture, what does the fear of the Lord mean to you?
2. Do you approach god casually or do you approach God with the awe and reverence that he deserves? Why are we so casual in our relationship with the Lord?
3. What is it that you worship? We feel as if worship needs to appeal to us as opposed to being the offering that we bring God? What does it mean to you to worship in Spirit and in Truth?
4. Worship is drawing near to God. How do you draw near to him when very sound of his voice makes you want to tremble, cower, and turn away in servile fear? How do you approach this God with the right kind of fear?