

Exodus 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 20 Exodus chapter 20 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant or your livestock or the sojourner who is within your gates.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that is your neighbour's.

[1 : 5 7] Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled.

And they stood far off and said to Moses, You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die. 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.

The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. And the Lord said to Moses, Thus you shall say to the people of Israel, You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.

You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me, and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen.

In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones.

[3 : 0 7] For if you wield your tool on it, you profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it. If you were asked to list the most famous chapters in the Bible, I am sure that Exodus 20 would be one of the top ten.

It is the chapter of the Ten Commandments. And the Ten Commandments have enjoyed a very prominent place within the Western imagination. Even if people don't know what the Ten Commandments are, they know what they stand for.

They stand for all these things that are the basis of social morality. They're the foundation of Western society. And the appeal to them has often taken on a political flavour in certain contexts.

Yet when we actually look at the Ten Commandments, they seem a bit disappointing. Do we really need to be told not to murder people? Do we really need to be told not to steal and all these other things?

And then some of the commandments just seem strange. If this is just the moral law summed up, why this one day and seven commandment? It all seems very strange.

[4 : 11] A lot of it seems unnecessary and superfluous, while other parts that aren't belabouring the obvious are making rather obscure and strange points. What sense are we to make of all of this?

Well, first of all, when we encounter the Ten Commandments, we can often detach them from the context in which they are given. The Ten Commandments are given at Sinai as a climax of Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

This is a sort of declaration of independence and a charter of their new existence as a people. This is the basis of the entire system and the way that they will relate to God.

It's not a regular legal code. It seems fairly rudimentary, but also it contains elements that do not usually fit within any legal code. It has a command about coveting.

Where do you find that in other legal codes? It's all very strange. As we read through it, though, we recognise certain patterns. And as we meditate upon these patterns, it will seem that there is more sense to be discovered within them.

[5 : 14] While at first glance the law may seem to be one of the driest parts of Scripture, lots of do's and don'ts and little else, if we meditate upon it, we may find a great deal of richness here.

But it's not entirely clear how we might meditate upon something as bare as you shall not steal. We can be tempted to reduce this just to merely obeying. Yet God has more for us than this.

God isn't just looking for us to not steal. There's more within that. And as we meditate upon the commandments and the way that they're given to us, we might see some of this. What does meditation involve?

It's like a dog with a bone. We chew it over. We labour to get all of the goodness out. God is here forming a bond with his people. This is a marriage document, among other things. And reflecting upon it will help us to understand the will of the divine husband.

It's a recognition that God doesn't put everything out on the surface. Sometimes authors can leave their readers with questions so that they will come to understanding as they try to puzzle out riddles.

[6 : 17] The riddle beckons you towards understanding. It forces you to undertake a journey for yourself rather than just having understanding handed to you on a plate. And God does not give all the goodness of his law up front.

The law requires lengthy meditation. God wants us to pour over his law, to devote our lives to understanding it inside and out. And as we look through the story of scripture, we can see this theme of meditation upon the law continuing.

The law is gradually taken into people as they reflect upon it. It's taken into people in the form of wisdom as they gain insight into the moral structure of the universe. It's taken into people in song as they no longer just externally assent to it, but they rejoice in it from the heart.

It's taken into people in the practice of the spirit as the spirit writes the law of God upon our hearts and we obey it from the heart. Obedience isn't the only goal.

Understanding is necessary. And we need not only to do what is good, but to perceive, to understand and to rejoice in its goodness. And this is all part of the process of growing up.

[7 : 23] Children need to learn not just to do what their parents tell them to, but also to discover the goodness of those commandments for themselves and to pursue that goodness from their heart. And meditating upon the law will lead to wisdom and delight and understanding.

And this requires a posture towards the law driven by love and faith. This is the law that's given to us by our Lord. It's the law that's given to us by the God who wants to and has set us free.

And as we approach the law in that way, we should discover what it means to live in liberty as those who have been set free. Legalism then is lying about the law. It presents the law as burdensome, merely as commandments.

It presents the law in detachment from God and his goodness and the liberty for which he set us free. It presents the law apart from faith. And Jesus talked about the law as having a logic to it.

The law can be summed up in two great commandments. The greatest, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second, love your neighbour as yourself.

[8 : 28] He also argued that there are weightier matters of the law. God's justice, mercy and faithfulness. They're the sun around which the law orbits. Understanding the law is really important then.

That the law is not just this set of detached commandments. There's a logic and a principle and structure to it. And as we explore it, we'll see that it hangs together.

And the deeper we look, the more we'll find we're confronted not just with do's and don'ts, but with the love of God himself and the desire of God that we be formed in that image.

There are a few examples of ways in which we can go about this meditation of the law. We can reflect upon the historical context of the giving of the law, which we're doing here. We can think about the way that it comes after God has delivered his people from slavery.

It's a movement from slavery into service. Now that movement into service is not a movement into this sort of libertarian freedom. Rather, it's a movement into service to something that will set you free in a truer way, that will order you towards that which is liberating and good and freeing.

[9 : 38] So for instance, when we understand the fourth commandment against that backdrop, it makes more sense. It comes around Pentecost time. It's a first fruits festival. It's the start of something new.

It's the establishment of a new people. It comes as the formation of a covenant. Sinai is a sort of wedding ceremony. There are other ways that we can think about the law and reflect upon it. We can think about the ways it's illuminated by the temple.

There are five tables of showbread on each side in the temple. There are five lampstands on each side. There are ten water chariots in the court. The law then is our bread that we feed upon.

It's the light that lightens our path and it's something that flows out, giving life to the world. And then we can look in the text and think about the structure of the commandments.

The commandments are divided into two halves. The first half, the first five, have explanations and rationales. As we read through them, we'll see each one of them has a warning attached, a blessing or promise attached, some explanation attached, or something else.

[10 : 42] The first half mention the name of God. And the first half are long. The second half are short. You can maybe think about these as like the two hands of the body.

There are two sets of five commandments. And there are commands that parallel each other in different ways as we look through it. There are unifying themes. We can think about the household as it appears in different commandments.

There are two core commandments at the heart. Positive commandments. There's the law concerning the Sabbath day. And there's the law concerning honoring father and mother.

And everything else around those are like the marble that has to be chipped away to reveal this positive sculpture in the center. And God has this sculpture, this life of the covenant that is supposed to be set free by all these things that we're supposed to avoid.

And what is that? It's remembering God. Enjoying life in his presence. Worshipping him. Taking a day off every week to reorder our lives to God.

[11 : 47] It's being released from the bondage of slavery and service. Of constant non-stop work. The work that characterized Israel in Egypt. And having time to be with God.

It's setting others free to enjoy that. What else does it involve? It involves positive relationships between man and woman. Between father and mother.

Husband and wife. And positive relationships between the generations. As children honor their parents. And parents delight in their children. As we read further on in scripture, we'll see more ways that this gets unpacked.

We can think about the exposition of the commandments. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 to 26. In these chapters, each one of the commandments is unpacked in some sort of succession.

It explains the logic of the commandments and relates them to very specific commands. It is maybe to be seen as the refraction of the bright light. The bright white light of the commandments into these different colors on the spectrum.

[12 : 54] And we can see all these different ways in which that one commandment can play out in different situations. So what we're seeing is that the law can be condensed in two key principles.

And those principles have an order to them. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And a second principle that arises from that. And your neighbor as yourself. It arises from it in part because to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Is to honor those also who are created in his image. As a corollary of that. There is a deep unity then to the entirety of the commandments. But then there is also this plurality.

And in this plurality we can understand some of the deeper rationale of the commandments. And some of the ways in which they're more rightly fulfilled. So as we see in Deuteronomy 26.

There is something that corresponds to the law concerning coveting. How is that law fulfilled? Not just in a commandment not to covet these different items. But in the positive practice of a feast.

[13 : 55] A feast in which you give thanks for what God has given to you. Where you show generosity to those who are in need in your community. To the Levite. To the stranger. And to any other person who might be in need.

And as you express contentment for what God has given you. So there's generosity, contentment and thanksgiving. That's how you fulfill the commandment not to covet.

Not just in a negative thing. But in a positive series of actions that are the alternative to that. And that's what we see as we reflect upon the law. The law is something that bounds the reality of a positive form of life.

It helps us to see what is the silhouette of the righteous life. Which is often filled out in other parts of the law. The law starts with the uniqueness of God and the salvation that he has wrought for Israel.

Well it's not just this abstract principle. It's about what God has done in history for his people. And a particular relationship that he has forged with them.

[14 : 56] This is personal. This is not just an abstract set of moral principles. God has delivered his people. He has entered into relationship with them. And this is what it means to be in relationship with God.

They should have no other gods before him. Now when we think about morality we often exclude any idea of idolatry. But yet idolatry is at the very heart of error.

The sins that people will do out of self-interest typically pale before the crimes they'll commit in service of a false god. Whether that's the god of the state. Whether it's the god of some ideology.

Or whether it's some pagan deity. God defeated the gods of the Egyptians. Gods that held the Egyptians in mental bondage and servitude to them. And God has saved the Israelites from service of these gods too.

He wants them to enjoy freedom in service of him. Serving the true God will release us from the bondage of service of false gods. Of the idolatries that hold us captive.

[15 : 59] You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness. God cannot be represented. God is above the creation. He created things.

He is not like the lesser deities of the creation. Some being that can be represented and contained within the creation itself. He exceeds the creation. He created it.

It is his creation. And so he cannot be bound to it. We cannot establish a sort of idol that gives us a handle on God. That allows us to have a sort of tool to control God.

To get God to do our bidding. No. God is above all these things. And as a result we must serve him in a way that acknowledges that. Refusing to make false images that would treat him in a way that he could be controlled.

And these are all forms of spiritual adultery. These are ways in which God's jealousy is provoked. We're setting something up in the place of God. Something that faces God.

[17 : 01] And something that stands in the place where his honour and true worship should be. Instead of that we have something that is usurping his status and his honour.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. We can often read this as if it were the commandment don't cuss. But that's not what it's saying. Or at least that's only a small part of what it's saying.

What does it mean to bear a name? Among other things it means to have a name attached to you. You can think about the way that in a few chapters time. Aaron will bear the name of Israel into God's presence.

He has the names of Israel and its tribes written upon him. On his forehead he has holy to the Lord. He has God's name written upon him. He bears God's name.

In the same way Israel was bearing God's name among the nations. We as God's people bear God's name as well. To bear God's name in vain is to act in a way that brings dishonour.

[17 : 59] That does not hold that name with the weight and the honour and the respect and the truth with which it should be held. With the faithfulness that should characterise any use, any bearing of that name.

As members of our families we bear the name of our family. We can bring dishonour to our family by our behaviour. Or we can bring honour by behaving in a way that befits those who are members of our family.

God in delivering Israel from Egypt placed his name upon them. Israel is my firstborn son. Israel represents me. Israel is mine. And for Israel to bear the name of the Lord is a fearful thing.

If they bear it in vain they will be judged and punished by the Lord for their unfaithfulness. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. The whole story of the Exodus is propelled by this quest to have a feast before the Lord.

To be released from non-stop labour and have some time to rest in God's presence. Pharaoh is a master who imposes non-stop work upon his slaves.

[19 : 04] But God is one who sets them free in order that they might rest and give rest. This isn't just rest for ourselves. This is rest that's supposed to be given to others.

And as a principle of Israel's life and economy they had to give rest to their servants as well. Give rest to their animals. Give rest to their land. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh.

He worked a work week. And he wants those named by his name to participate in his creation and formation of the world. To have the dignity of this same work week.

Honor your father and your mother is the fifth commandment. It's the final one of the first five. And the first five commandments deal with vertical relationships. The second five with horizontal relationships.

Our father and our mother represent not just our physical father and mother. But also any authorities that are placed over us. They are the authorities that God has placed that rule over us.

[20 : 07] And we're supposed to submit to them and to honour them. They represent God's own authority in some way. This is an authority that's not just an authority of fathers. It's an authority of mothers too.

Of men and women together. The unity of father and mother is something that is at the very basis of authority within society. It's this foundational relationship.

The relationship of the mother and the father. That is the one from which all other authority structures within society arise. And if Israel wants their days to be long in the land.

They have to respect such authority structures. The sixth commandment. You shall not murder. Addresses the most fundamental violation of others made in the image of God. God creates.

He gives life. And for us to murder is to take life into our own hands. It's to present ourselves as God in some way. To set ourselves up in opposition to God.

[21 : 05] It can also be seen as a way in which we strike against God himself. Satan is described as a murderer from the beginning. He can't give life. But he can take it away.

He can destroy life. And that has been his quest from the very outset. He tries to murder Adam and Eve by bringing them into death. The seventh commandment.

You shall not commit adultery. Upholds the dignity of the bond of marriage. And the crime of undermining that. Of betraying the faithfulness that should exist between a husband and a wife.

Of acting in a way that is sexually immoral. Or in a way that is promiscuous. Or in a way that is characterized by indecency. These are all in their own ways violations of the image of God.

In ourselves or in others. It's a way of attacking the image of God in the unity of man and wife. This commandment exists to protect and uphold the honor of the marriage bet.

[22 : 08] And the importance of the marriage bond. The eighth commandment concerns stealing. A person isn't just their body. A person isn't just their life. A person also has things that belong to them.

Things that express and extend their dignity out into the world. And a violation of those things. Or a taking of those things. Can be another form of attack upon the image of God in the person. Think about the way that we feel if someone breaks into our house.

And takes some of our stuff. We feel violated. We feel unsafe. We feel that we ourselves have been threatened. The commandment concerning stealing here is not just upholding property as such.

And saying that all property must be upheld. Indeed as we see this principle developed in places like Deuteronomy. It pushes in a surprising direction. It protects for instance the right of the poor to glean from the fields of the rich.

There is a duty that we owe to each other. And we do not have absolute property. We have a duty of care for people. And if we do not fulfill that we are stealing from them.

[23 : 14] The ninth commandment concerns false witness. And false witness is not just lying. We can include lying within it to a certain extent. But it is false witness against your neighbour.

There are certain times when it is appropriate to give the wrong message to people. If they are seeking to destroy someone else. It is appropriate to mislead them. This is something that scripture gives us numerous examples of.

What false witness against one's neighbour means is something more precise. It can include such things as gossip. As spreading rumours. Of slandering someone.

Of seeking to bring them down. With our speech. With something like false testimony against them in court. Yet the commandment includes more than this. The commandment also relates to the use of authority structures.

As a means of oppressing or wronging other people. In this case the legal system. It can be a way in which people take advantage of power structures.

[24 : 13] To mistreat others who are not in so powerful a position. This use of power structures against our neighbour. Can be seen in a great many different cases. It can be seen not just in the law court.

But in various other social and civil and political institutions. The final commandment is perhaps a surprising one. It tells us not to covet. And gives a long list of the things that we are not supposed to covet.

Coveting is not an external action. In the way that most of the other things mentioned in the law are. Rather it calls for us to inspect inside. To consider our desires.

To reflect upon how our desires are ordered relative to our neighbour. And that reordering of desires is something that the law is always pointing towards. Now when we read the tenth commandment.

It invites us to re-read the rest of the commandments in the light of it. To propel us to investigate. Bringing the light of this commandment. To bear upon all these other sins.

[25 : 15] How is it that desire gives rise to murder? Or to adultery? Or to stealing? Or to bearing false witness? Jesus discusses this in the Sermon on the Mount.

And other such places. We must bring this light of the law. To bear upon our inner life. Not just our external actions. And the tenth commandment.

Calls us to just that sort of meditation. Now the law as we've seen it here. In this very rudimentary way. Is far more rich than it might look at first glance.

There's a lot more going on here. There's things to be learnt from its structure. There's things to be learnt from its deeper logic. And the children of Israel were given this law as they were encountered by God himself.

God did not merely give this by Moses to the people. He spoke to the people directly. This is personal. God is relating to his bride. And he's calling for his bride to take these commandments.

[26 : 13] Not just as onerous restrictions. But as a new form of life. A form of life in which freedom. The freedom for which God had set Israel free. Would be enjoyed.

A question to consider. Moses says 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.

What are the different meanings of the word fear in that statement?