

Reverence and Regulations

Exodus 20:18-26

Introduction

Review: Egypt, Red Sea, Wilderness, Sinai (Ten Words). Decalogue: love God, honor each other.

- The triune God led them through the wilderness and spoke to them at the mountain.
- How should you respond to God and his Word? (e.g., taking hurricane evacuation order seriously; trapped on roof vs. safe somewhere else).

Presence: We were created to be united to God, in his presence, in his garden paradise. Our disobedience and sin has separated us from him. How can we get back to the presence of God? We can't, God has to bring his presence to us.

- He dwells in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
- He dwells in the Tabernacle in the wilderness.
- He dwells in the temple in his holy city.
- He ultimately takes on flesh and dwells with us as the incarnate Word.¹
 - The whole point of Leviticus (*Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, Michael Morales) is that the rituals and sacrifices of Israel are not religious formalities but a means for sinful humanity to approach a holy God and enter His presence.
 - God longs to dwell with his people, revealing his holiness and love. He provides access (temporarily, in "shadows" in the OT sacrificial system) and permanently in Christ.
- What do we do in the presence of God?

The holiness of God demands fear and reverence, but the grace of God provides a way for us to approach him in worship.

Tension: There should be a healthy tension between fear and joy when we approach God.

- Healthy theology embraces tension. Roller coaster (real fear, real joy). High dive to Father (real fear, real joy, real trust).

¹⁸ 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 ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 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." ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. ²² 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.' ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace

¹ Jn 1:14

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. ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

1. Fear and Grace in God's Presence (vv. 18-21)

¹⁸ 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 ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 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." ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Fear: ¹⁸ 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,

- The mountain of God is engulfed by smoke (smoking mountain = run; Dante's Peak), lightning, and deafening thunder (and trumpets?). How should you respond to a sight like this? Fear and trembling.
- ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is 6:4-5).
- ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead (Rev. 1:17). Probably should respond like this (might even think you should die).
 - When you fear the right thing you don't fear the wrong thing (e.g., fear shots, but fear disease more, so I don't fear shots). If you fear God, you don't have to fear persecution, or suffering, or tribulation, or loss of reputation, or poverty, or sickness, or death.
- Too many of us have become too familiar, too casual with God (we use "awesome" to describe everything from a good meal to the power of the atomic bomb). This Jesus is my best friend idea, that treats him like my therapist or buddy is missing something.
 - God is your great counselor. He is your friend. He does love you. But don't mistake his compassion for weakness.

Holy: The book of Isaiah shows the effect of this vision of God. He could not forget that God is holy. He uses the title 'the Holy One of Israel' 25 times in the book.

- **What is holiness?** Holiness is one of those words that human language has a hard time fully communicating. The root means "to cut, separate, or set apart" (i.e., something that is set apart for special use). We call something like this "sacred." So the Bible speaks of holy ground, holy assemblies, a holy nation, a holy city, holy promises, a holy kiss (don't get any ideas), etc. These are all things that are set apart from their "common" counterparts. They are set apart to be devoted to God. But how would this work when applied to God himself? From what can you separate God to make him holy?

- “The very god-ness of God means that he is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. God is one of a kind. [He’s] in a class by himself. In that sense, he is [completely] holy” (Piper).
- To put it another way. “If the holiness of a person derives from being separated from the world and devoted to God, to whom is God devoted so as to derive his holiness? **To no one but himself...** When asked his name in Exodus 3:14, he said, ‘I am who I am.’” God’s being and character are undetermined by anything outside himself. “He is not holy because he keeps the rules. He wrote the rules! God is not holy because he keeps the law. The law is holy because it reveals God. God is absolute. Everything else is derivative” (Piper).
- “We must not think of God as the highest in an ascending order of beings, starting with the single cell, and going on up from the fish to the bird to the animal to man to angel to cherub to God. God is as high above an archangel as above a caterpillar, for the gulf that separates the archangel from the caterpillar is finite, while the gulf between God and the archangel is infinite” (Tozer), (cf. omnipresence; fully everywhere at once, not stretched).
- The response to God’s holiness should be overwhelming awe and worship.

Distance: and they stood far off. You would too! (Fear of heights, mall edge, balcony, etc.) Only God should put the fear of God in you. We’ve talked about this a lot: fear of God is good and right.

- Fear frames the 10 commandments (before and after). **We really should “think twice before we sin.”**

Voice of Death: ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

- Scared of the voice of God.
- Sheer volume! It is not a “still small voice” (mistranslation) in 1 Kgs 19:12 but a “roaring and thunderous voice.”² Hearing God speak audibly was frightening for the Israelites. He can softly and gently put something on our minds and hearts, but his audible voice is overwhelmingly loud.

Condemned: The law, including the Ten Commandments, serves many purposes in the Bible. (1) It reflects the path of Godly living. (2) It restrains wicked behavior to protect people. (3) It also serves as a mirror to the human heart, revealing our weakness and wickedness, our need for a Savior.

- #1-2. Never worshipped anything other than God. Never idolized something with your time, money, or heart other than God?
- #3. Never misrepresented God by your behavior or used his name or promises flippantly or inappropriately?
- #4. Never worked when you should have rested? Always trusted God to provide? Always set aside time to worship?

² Lust, J. (Johan). “Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound: Elijah at Horeb, 1 Kings 19:12.” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 1 (January 1975): 110–15.

- #5. Always honored your mother and father in speech, attitude, and behavior? Never rolled your eyes or talked back?
- #6. Never been angry toward or hated someone?
- #7. Never slept with, fooled around with, or lusted after someone other than your spouse?
- #8. Never stolen anything? A candy bar, timesheet, unreported wages?
- #9. Never lied? Never put someone down? Never flattered?
- #10. Never desired something that didn't belong to you? Content in God's provision?
- Most of us didn't "miss a few," we failed them all!
 - Tell me again who is a "pretty good person"? Compared to whom?
 - "Even our tears of repentance must be washed in the blood of the lamb before they are acceptable to God."
 - Water with 10% urine? Communion with 10% flu? 9/10 ain't that bad. We might not all be as bad as we can be, but we are all contaminated by sin.
 - "The slightest sin has an infinite hatefulness" (Edwards), because God has an infinite holiness in himself.
 - **The depth of God's grace can only be fully embraced when the depth of your sin is deeply felt.** If you've never felt hopelessly guilty and exposed before God, never recoiled at all in his presence, then I wonder if you've ever experienced God.
- 10 commandments condemn us but Jesus saves us. Other religions say you have to "D-O" or "D-O-N-T" but the gospel tells us that Jesus has "D-O-N-E" it for us.

Mediator: Moses stood between God and the people to deliver God's word. He mediated the terrifying presence of God for these fearful people.

- But Moses is an imperfect mediator. We've seen his weakness (e.g., Amalekite arms) and shortcomings (e.g., Jethro judging). Moses had access to the throne of God, Jesus sits on the throne. Moses can ask the creator for an intervention, Jesus is the creator who can intervene. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself (Heb 3:3).
- Jesus stands between us and the Father. He approaches what we can't approach because he is perfectly obedient. But more than that, he pays the price for our sin that we should pay. **He lives the life we cannot live and dies the death we should die so that we can have access to life with him now and forever.**

Fear and Fear Not: 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." We are called to fear God, so we don't have to fear anything else. The right fear abolishes all other fear.

- Like Abraham was tested with Isaac, or the Israelites were tested previously to trust God for water, food, and protection. God is again testing them.
 - He is testing to see if they will fear him. This is not a test that he wants them to fail. **This is the test of a loving parent wanting their child to succeed.**

- He has already brought them from slavery, through the wilderness, to the mountain. They are his treasured possession.
- At the heart of the story of Israel is the gospel that where Israel failed, Jesus (the true Israel) succeeded.
 - God is not seeking your failure, he's seeking your trust and your obedience.

Not Yet: ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. The holiness of God is an unrealized invitation for his people (e.g., Adam and Eve **naked and ashamed**). Sin must be acknowledged, exposed, and atoned for. Most of us would rather just run for cover.

The Gracious Pull of Fear: Godly fear should draw us near to God, not push us away. A doctor's diagnosis should push you to treatment, not away.

- If God wasn't powerful, then he wouldn't save us. But that also means he wouldn't punish sin or destroy injustice. Too often we misunderstand grace and forgiveness as arbitrary. God doesn't ignore sin (e.g., Romans 6).
- ⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared (Ps 130:4).
 - Forgiveness and fear go hand in hand (e.g., burning bush).
 - The same fire that burns you warms you. The same fire that warms the house can destroy the house.
 - Only a God strong enough to defeat sin and death is strong enough to forgive us, and that is a God we should fear (but fear as a loving parent or good police officer).
- *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis). In Narnia, the children meet a pair of beavers who describe Aslan, the mighty king to them. Mr. Beaver tells Susan "He is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the Great Lion." Susan asks "Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." Mrs. Beaver responds, "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

2. Guidelines for God's Altar (vv. 22-26)

²² 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. ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

Witness: ²² 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.’

- Moses relays the Word of God. All these people have seen God’s glory with their own eyes.
- **Once you’ve experienced God, you should act accordingly.**
 - Worship is the first and most basic response of a believer to their Savior. Don’t skip worship to get to something else. Praise, prayer, and worship are good and useful. They are basic but not “basic.” They are necessary. **You never graduate from worship.**
- **People who treat God flippantly haven’t seen him clearly** (e.g., Rip Current).
- How we approach God in private and public worship should reflect the reality of his holiness and the significance of his salvation. “Anything” is not acceptable (so Moses gives them guidelines).

Alone: ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. Only God should be the object of our worship (e.g., Commands #1-3). **Don’t explicitly or implicitly add anything to the worship alongside of God** (e.g., physical idols, personalities, preferences, etc.)

Altar: ²⁴ 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... ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it.

- There are some interesting guidelines for the type of altar they should make to offer sacrifices to God. Sacrifices are not new in the Bible (Gen 3, Abraham, etc.). These temporary sacrifices point to our ultimate sacrifice in Jesus.
- The basic point seems to be that worship should point to God and no one else. **It should reflect the holiness of God rather than the creativity of man.**
 - There is a place for human creativity and artistry, but that place is to point to God. **What is the line?** It takes wisdom, honesty, and humility.
- An altar of earth... *If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones.* **Why?**
 - Ornate, chiseled stone runs the risk of idolatry, elevating the human maker rather than the God we intend to worship (e.g., Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo). Look at me vs. look at God. **Does our worship make us more amazed at us or at God?**
 - The point is not that God doesn’t want nice things (e.g., read Revelation) or deserve our best (e.g., read the Psalms, and Paul, etc.).
 - But God doesn’t hear us better if our altar is prettier. **God doesn’t love us more if our worship is nicer according to human standards.**
- **We cannot save ourselves.** God doesn’t love us because of the quality of our worship. Rather, our worship is a response to his grace.

Undercarriage: ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.’ I bet you haven’t thought to much about the danger of stairs in worship.

- For those at this time (e.g., Tunics/Dresses; Kilt vs. Dress is what is or isn't underneath). Walking up an elevated platform would expose someone's uncovered undercarriage to the altar (and probably to the people). **Cover your eyes Jr.**
- There's an important reminder, even the most "elevated" religious leader is unclean before God.
 - Be careful that the only person we elevate in our worship is God (why I like preaching from the floor). A stage is fine if it's to see, hear, and fit but not if it's to elevate the speaker.
 - At the end of the day, even the greatest people, as high as they go are still naked and depraved in God's sight.
 - If I've ever impressed you with my preaching, just know if you get to know me better, in some way, you'll be disappointed (ask my mom). I will let you down (but God never will).

See God: The goal of worship, reading your Bible, studying theology, gathering in community is not to elevate yourself but **to see God**. It is so easy to get distracted from God and start looking at our own performance or the performance of others.

- When we see our sin for what it really is it humbles us to look to God rather than someone or something else.
 - ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven..." ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth..." ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matt 5).

Conclusion

God of the OT: But we live in the covenant. That is the God of the OT (heresy; God never changes). The same God of the OT is the same God of the NT, revealed more fully, later in salvation history, by Jesus.

- In fact, we should revere God even more than the Israelites at Sinai.
 - ²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who **is speaking**. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time **his voice shook the earth**, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but **also the heavens**." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore **let us be grateful** for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus **let us offer to God acceptable worship**, with **reverence and awe** (cf. *phobos*), ²⁹ for our God is a consuming **fire** (Heb 12:25-29).
- We should cultivate a godly fear of God that draws us to his power and holiness, keeps us from sin, desires to love and worship him with a pure heart and truthful spirit.
 - That we would see our sin clearly, so we can humbly turn to God and depend on him fully. That we would worship him and only him.