

## Exodus 20:1-3 Looking after Number One

**“No other gods before me”**

A survey in the USA back in 2007 found that a greater percentage of people could name all the ingredients of a **Big Mac** than could recollect all of the **Ten Commandments**.

I'm fairly sure I remember from maybe 20 or more years back - though I can't find it on Google! - a TV series in this country called **“Are you still taking the Tablets?”**. Quite a clever title, sounding as if it was referring to **medical treatment** kind of tablets, but with the word “tablet” also being used to describe how Moses first received the **hard copy** of the Ten Commandments.

***The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”***

(Exodus 24:12)

Basically, the series was asking, do people think that those Ten Commandments have any relevance for society and individual behaviour nowadays?

Although we might well have seen representations of those two tablets on **church walls**, with the first four God-directed commandments on the first, and the remaining six neighbour-directed commandments on the second - and that's a fair way to divide the set of ten - I personally doubt that was what Moses was given. More likely that the two tablets are copies, having precisely the same writing on both - just as the two parties making a **legal agreement** nowadays *both* go away with their own copy of it. But we can discuss those details a bit later.

However you imagine those tablets looking, this is one of the Big Moments of the OT. And when you consider just what a span of time the OT covers, these two Big Moments, the **Exodus** and the **Giving of the Law** are so close together that they could almost be regarded as two aspects of a single even more momentous event.

It isn't just that God frees his people. It isn't just that God gives his people rules to live by. I think there's a clear connection here, as **God, who freed his people, demands their sole allegiance**.

And there's a clear order here, too. Redemption comes first. Laws are given to a people who have already been redeemed. They have been saved, and *then* given laws to live by. It is not that they are given laws *in order to* be saved.

And notice that we can have far too negative a view of God's Law, too. It wouldn't have made sense if God had given his people freedom, only to take it back again a few months later. We need to see these Ten Commandments - or **Ten**

**Words**, which is actually a better translation - as some kind of expression of that new freedom.

They have been taken out of idol-worshipping Egypt. They will be living instead in idol-worshipping Canaan. And God's Law is meant to ensure that they don't simply exchange one kind of slavery for another. So, years later, we can read in the Psalms:

***Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.***

(Psalms 119:97)

***Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble.***

(Psalms 119:165)

And even in the NT, where we see the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ giving an even more profound liberty, we still have the affirmation that

***So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.***

(Romans 7:12)

And that's why, now we have come to this section of the book of Exodus, we're slowing down, and taking these Ten Words one at a time. We could do an overview of the chapter to start with, but we're moving straight into these first three verses. That first sentence that God spoke will give us all the background we need, if we just stop to think about it for a moment. As we think about **Looking after Number One** by *redefining*, practically, our understanding of what should constitute Number One in our lives.

But we should really remember the run-up to this chapter. You might see those words on church walls, starting with ...

***And God spoke all these words, saying, ...***

(Exodus 20:1)

But what preceded this verse, I hope you'll recall, was some pretty dark and scary stuff.

***On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.***

(Exodus 19:16-17)

And that's why we read on a few verses at the end of the section this morning, too. It's tricky to work out precisely where Moses was when those words are first spoken. It almost looks, in some ways, as if those words hang in the air by themselves. We're told that God summoned Moses up Mount Sinai several times,

and sends him back down again. At this precise moment, we can't properly pin down where he is. But the narrative certainly picks up that introduction of dread:

***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."***

(Exodus 20:18-19)

And then we are told just why that dread was important, too. The people are afraid and trembling, we're told, once again. But as is so often the case in the Bible, when we see people afraid, we're also told a reason why we need not give way to abject fear. Actually, God has a purpose for fear, and it is good and wholesome.

We saw something like this in the latest David Attenborough mini-series on BBC recently, about colour in the natural world. Some animals use colour as camouflage. Others seem to flaunt themselves. Think of those ridiculously colourful **tropical frogs**. Those are warning colours. They proclaim to any potential predator that they are chock full of deadly poisons. *Yes, you can eat me, and I'll be dead ... but there's a good chance that you will be, too!* Fear of death keeps both potential predator and potential prey alive.

And the "fear of the Lord", as the Bible describes it, is meant to keep *us* alive, too, if we come before a God with whom we dare not mess.

***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)

But fear is not all that should come to our minds and hearts when we think about this God. There should be gratitude, too, if you are one of his people. Which, in the OT sense, at least, these Israelites *are*, now. So God starts off *not* with Rule Number One, but a reminder of who is speaking. That's where we're starting this morning, with

*Who is speaking ... before  
His first word(s)*

- **Who is speaking**

***"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."***

(Exodus 20:2)

So just think how this must shine out like a **lighthouse** in the midst of a storm. We've had all that thunder and lightning, and even what sounds as if it might have been an earthquake or a volcano, in the previous chapter. It has been seriously

scary. But now there is a reminder that that awesome power was directed for the Israelites' *defence* and protection.

Much, much later on in Israel's history, you have the same thought coming out. God depicted as a warrior splattered with blood. But *do not fear!*

***“Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? “It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.”***

(Isaiah 63:1)

And you could flick that over into NT thinking too, couldn't you, with the hymns:

*Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious;  
See the Man of sorrows now;  
From the fight returned victorious,  
Every knee to Him shall bow;*

*Crown Him the Lord of Love:  
Behold His hands and side;  
Rich wounds yet visible above  
In beauty glorified:*

And back to the OT again, and another less familiar prophet, talking like Isaiah, about the God who will intervene *again* when his people need him:

***The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.***

(Zephaniah 3:17)

So do not fear the roar of *this* Lion, for *this* God is your protector. We have a Saviour who has not just risked his life to save us, but *given* his life to save us. A greater redemption from a greater oppressor than Egypt's Pharaoh.

Do you think, by the way, that we should remember that number 10 as we read through this chapter? How many plagues were inflicted upon the Egyptians, during that conflict protracted by Pharaoh's stubbornness? *Ten*. Ten not just judgements but mockeries of the Egyptian so-called gods.

*Each of the ten plagues was more than just a dramatic sign to Pharaoh that he must release the Hebrews. Each was a symbolic defeat of an Egyptian deity.*

*Osiris, whose bloodstream was believed to be the Nile, bleeds out before his worshippers when Yahweh turns the Nile to blood.*

*In reverence to Heqet, the frog-goddess of birth, Egyptians regarded frogs as sacred and not to be killed. Yahweh slays them by the thousands.*

*Egyptian gods governing fertility, crops, livestock and health are all shown to be impotent before the mighty outstretched arm of Israel's God.*

*In the ninth plague of darkness, Yahweh demonstrates his rule over the sun god Ra, whom Pharaoh was believed to embody.*

And then, finally, when the destroying angel - God's destroying angel - stalks the land and strips it of its male firstborn, we see this God supreme over life and death.

To the Egyptians, this God speaks ten words culminating in death. But *this* God, with this unique identifying name - we usually see it written as "the LORD" in our modern Bibles - is the one who has already committed himself to the nation of Israel. He's the one Moses encountered in this very same bit of ground decades back, and whose memory of his promises goes way back further again. So Moses comes back to his people with a message:

***"The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, 'I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to ... a land flowing with milk and honey.'"***

(Exodus 3:16-17)

So who is speaking these Ten Words on Mount Sinai?

***"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."***

(Exodus 20:2)

Are we going to expect ten further words of death, or what? If Moses wasn't leading them out of Egypt to kill them with thirst in the wilderness, why would the God who encountered and commissioned Moses now come down to that mountain to blight their lives with a different kind of slavery?

It's got to be the very opposite of that. It's so similar to what we also see in the NT.

***For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.***

(Galatians 5:1)

So if there are laws to live by - and there are in OT *and* NT - then those laws should be seen as liberating, rather than merely restricting. If God says ...

***"You shall not murder."***

(Exodus 20:13)

then it leaves all of the rest of life open for the celebration of life. When he says ....

***“You shall not commit adultery.”***

(Exodus 20:14)

that prepares the ground for the promotion of the far greater rewards of life-long faithfulness.

So we come to understand something of the nature of God by keeping these commandments that reflect his nature. He is the Living God, so we need to understand life. He is the Faithful God, so we need to revel in ourselves being people of faithfulness. God is no thief, but a generous giver ... and so ...

***Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***

(2 Corinthians 9:7)

Not that we will ever out-give the grace of God, or outdo the faithfulness of the God of covenant-love ... but this is how we may please this God by living in ways which reflect his own character.

So the Israelites are pointed back to the Exodus, and called to a life of grateful and glad obedience. Just as we nowadays look back to the Cross, and also called to a new and radically different life.

***For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.***

(2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

So that is who is speaking. But what do we make of ...

- **His first word(s)**

***“You shall have no other gods before me.”***

(Exodus 20:3)

And you could say that that is simple. The Egyptians worshipped idols, *literal* idols. So the Israelites - and us - we mustn't do that. But that is what follows on with the *second* word - at least the way that Protestants have typically divided the passage into ten. It's not actually the case that we get the numbers listed in the *right* margin, it would be, of the original Hebrew scroll.

So already we're starting to look for something a little less literal, something more about our thinking and our feeling, our subconscious attitudes, than just the official stuff that we would write on a **Statement of Faith**.

And actually that might imply that we might have a very theologically correct Statement of Faith ... but some "other gods" might still linger in or even dominate our lives. We will very likely still have some nice **Christian plaques** on the walls of our houses, because we certainly wouldn't want to deny those things we want to be the basic foundations of our lives.

It's just that some other attitudes or values have started to muscle in on our lives, too. Not things that outright contradict our formal beliefs ... but they just sidle up alongside and start to corrode them more subtly.

And I wonder whether we shouldn't trace them right back to the Garden of Eden, and the Serpent's slippery words:

***But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."***

(Genesis 3:4-5)

See, there's the **bait** dangling on the hook: instead of God alone being God, *you can too*, at least a bit. If you're made in that image, isn't it only right that you should develop that family likeness, and grow towards lesser dependence? Decide things for yourself, instead of having to submit all your plans for approval. Wouldn't it be so much better to have that bit of autonomy?

You're not actually saying that you want God to vacate his throne entirely ... just to move over a bit. And so we come to the "Jesus and ... (something)" approach to theology - and especially how we can be saved.

"Jesus and *my good deeds*" is the most common one, I guess - especially when it comes to a set of rules like in this chapter. And we can have the attitude of that sadly naive young man who bounced up to Jesus:

***The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"***

(Matthew 19:20)

Admittedly, those words could have been an admission that he still feels something is missing. Or they could be the stupid proud assertion that you so often hear nowadays, people "*humbly* (or so they say) hoping" that their good deeds will outweigh their bad. But, do you see the basic "other god" approach there? Here is God's basic claim to sovereignty in salvation:

***But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour.***

(Hosea 13:4)

***“And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”***

(Isaiah 45:21-22)

It just simply has to be what we're going to finish by singing, in a few minutes' time:

*Nothing in my hand I bring  
Simply to thy Cross I cling*

But it's not just in regard to salvation that we look to settle other things onto God's throne. How about God being our sole satisfaction? Don't we *in practice* live as if we need something or someone else, too? Perhaps their addition of something to our lives? Comfort. Admiration. Validation.

*Practically, we live as polytheists. Our idolatry is a “both-and” arrangement: I need God AND I need a spouse. I need God AND I need a smaller waist size. I need God AND I need good health. I need God AND I need a well-padded bank account.*

*It often takes a crisis to point out our folly. There is nothing like a financial crisis to teach us our worship of money and comfort in addition to God. There is nothing like a wayward child or a divorce to teach us our worship of having a perfect family in addition to God. There is nothing like the ageing process to teach us our worship of health and beauty in addition to God.*

I wonder if we get some idea about where our hearts are oriented in our idle moments. And is it significant that idle, I...D...L...E, moments might turn into idol, I...D...O...L, moments? For me, it might well be the **early morning shower**.

And sometimes, I can honestly say, I get some of my best ideas for **future sermons** - or how to continue from where I left it last night - in the shower. But sometimes my thoughts drift elsewhere, too.

**Garden  
House  
Holiday  
Family**

And there might not be anything wrong with those at all. We've missed seeing our family in person over the last year. I think I'd argue we have responsibilities to our children and grandchildren that we would be only too delighted to fulfil, now it seems we're going to be more able to do so.

And just see from that just how subtle these temptations can be, to ask and expect God to just budge over a bit. I still find it chilling when I think back to a Christian couple we knew, way back, living in rented accommodation, speaking



about how much they wanted a place of their own. That to me is totally understandable. Jenny and I only rented highly subsidised college accommodation for the first three years of our time together. I can't possibly criticise anyone for aspiring to be a home-owner.

But there was just something about the way that one of that couple I was talking about said, *That's not too much to ask, is it?* ... as if it was somehow a *right* ... that they perhaps even thought God sort of owed them - though they'd probably still have run a mile from actually expressing it in those terms.

So folks, in summing up now, we've got this first commandment. We're called, first of all, to remember who it is who is speaking:

***"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."***

(Exodus 20:2)

See the commitment of your Heavenly Father to do you good. Ask yourself whether, if he has already done so much to set you free from slavery, he would ever demand of you something that would ever cramp you or diminish you or demean you.

And, on the basis of the (hopefully obvious) answer to that question, recognise God's wisdom in making this demand upon our lives, as well as his right to do so.

***"You shall have no other gods before me."***

(Exodus 20:3)

That is how we are created to most fully flourish. To whatever extent we place any kind of idol, any kind of anything else, on the throne that is God's alone, we deprive ourselves rather than fulfil ourselves. We exert ourselves for something that cannot deliver upon empty promises. We live for something that cannot satisfy. We only short-change ourselves by exerting ourselves to earn what can only be received as a gift ... and then we proudly congratulate ourselves for our self-sufficient stupidity.

***"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."***

***"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?"***

***"Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."***

(Isaiah 55:1-2)

What Jesus said was so simple, so obvious, but so profound.

***“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”***

(Matthew 6:19-21)

That’s where our hearts lead our thoughts in those idle moments. Your feet take you thoughtlessly to the shrine of your God, capital G, or gods, little G’s. But, as we used to hear in those old Western movies, **This town ain’t big enough for the two of us**. And this *world* is not big enough for two gods, if one of them is the true and living God.

***“But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him?”***

(2 Chronicles 2:6)

And therefore, says Jesus,

***“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”***

(Matthew 6:24)

Or God and your ambition. Or God and your good looks. Or God and your church. Or God and your family. Or God and *anything* else, no matter how good and proper the anything else might be, in its good and proper place.

So, way, way back ...

***“You shall have no other gods before me.”***

(Exodus 20:3)

And almost right to the other end of the Bible, the same message:

***And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.***

(1 John 5:20-21)

**“No other gods before me”**