

The law

1. *The law restrains by fear*

2. *The law creates distance between God and His people*

3. *The law is given 'on account of transgressions'*

• *Provides a measure of obedience*

• *Moses' law is not the way Christian obedience is produced*

Moses ascends the mountain yet again

• *Hears God's voice*

• *But does not see him*

• *Further regulations*

In Exodus 20:18–21 the story now tells us what was happening as the law was being given.

1. **The law restrains by fear.** Awe-inspiring phenomena were continuing to be seen and heard as the law was being announced by God¹.

2. **The law creates distance between God and His people.** There was nothing encouraging for the people as the law was being given. The law did not bring them near to God; it drove them away. They said to Moses, '*You speak with us, and we shall listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die*'¹. Another result of the giving of the law is that the people dislike close contact with God.

3. **The law is given 'on account of transgressions'**. Moses explains the situation. God has tested the people before, but now the fearful phenomena on Mount Sinai is a further testing from God. Exodus 20:20 is a key statement and gives us a vital commentary on the purpose of the law. It is surely the explanation of Paul's remark that the law was given 'on account of sin'¹.

Its background is to be seen in the various occasions when God had tested Israel and they had failed the test. Before they have been sinfully unwilling to listen to Moses, and unwilling to trust in God at a time of testing. Now they will do anything. 'We shall listen to you!', they say. What has made the difference is that now they are afraid to disobey. The law is producing a measure of obedience in them; it is the result of fear of God's glory.

Moses explains what has happened. God has come so that the fear of Him may be upon the people to keep them from sinning. This was precisely Paul's point in Galatians 3:19.

Exodus 20:21 brings this little unit to a close. '*And the people stood at a distance, and Moses approached the thick darkness where God was*'. Now further details of the requirements of the law must be given. Moses ascends the mountain yet again.

The law of Moses is not the way in which Christian obedience is produced. 'For you have not come to what may be touched', says the epistle to the Hebrews referring to this very passage, '...to a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them...' ¹. 'You have not come to that!' says the New Testament. There could scarcely be a stronger statement that the method of producing 'holiness' is quite different from what was operating at Sinai.

Moses draws near to the thick darkness¹. He hears a voice but he is not allowed to see the glory of God on Sinai. God speaks and is given a message to pass on to the Israelites². They have had the experience of literally hearing God speak to them in an audible voice. The entire people, including Moses, had stood at the foot of the mountain and had heard God speak to them. Now the people want this privilege no longer. They are afraid. The rest of the law given at this time will come through the mediation of Moses. Exodus 20:22–23:19 will all be sheer legislation. This section of Exodus, chapters 20:22–23:33, is called 'the book of the covenant'³. First comes a short prologue⁴ and then the regulations begin with the words in Exodus 21:1, '*These are the "cases"*' (or 'decisions' – *mishpatim*).

Moses had been with the people while the Ten Commandments were given. The rest of the law is given to Moses alone who must hand on to the people what God has said to him¹. All of 20:22–23:33 is given to Moses on the lower slopes of Sinai. The people withdrew from hearing God audibly on

¹ 20:18

¹ 20:19

¹ Gal 3:10

¹ Heb 12:18-19

¹ 20:21
² 20:22

³ 24:7
⁴ 20:22-26

¹ 20:22-23:33

the lower part of the mountain^{□2}. After the law of 20:23–23:33 has been given to Moses he will ascend to the top of the mountain.

God had spoken to the people without making any use of images

- No other gods
- No idols
- Commands concerning the building of an altar

For the Christian no direct application – yet a reminder

- That each Christian is a priest
- An intercessor
- Idolatry is destructive
- Misrepresentation of God – the greatest outrage

God had spoken to the people without making any use of images. They had heard His voice^{□1} but no visible model of any god was used, neither should there be in the future any representations of God^{□2}. ‘Do not make any gods to be alongside me; you are not to make for yourself gods of silver and gods of gold^{□3}. It seems this is the central emphasis at this point. Two of the ten commandments are being reinforced and developed, the first^{□4} and the second^{□5}. They must not have another god besides Yahweh, and they must not make an idol, a physical representation of God.

Another word of command concerns how the Israelites will make an altar. The altar must be made of earth. It must not be made of stone^{□1} and must be simple in design. There must be no stairs at the side of the altar; the absence of stairs will prevent immodesty^{□2}. Other nations had priests who wore short aprons but otherwise were almost naked. Israel’s law demanded longer outer garments; it forbade steps up to the top of the altar; and it demanded the priest wear underclothing^{□3}.

The Christian has very little to do with this kind of regulation; he does not need it directly. Yet it reminds each Christian that he too is a ‘priest’ in a sense. He does not work in an earthly temple in Jerusalem, but he has a priestly ministry to the people around him. He intercedes for them. He advises them and counsels them, pointing to the God of the Bible who wants to be reconciled to them. He presents to people around him the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. His modesty will come through his following the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is the kind of area where we are to trust the Holy Spirit and follow obvious principles of wisdom and love towards others. Like the healed demoniac^{□1□2}, anyone who is led by the Holy Spirit will be ‘clothed and in his right mind’! The fact that this prologue to the ‘Book of the Covenant’ is specially concerned with idolatry and corrupt worship lets us know that the foundations of any relationship with God is to be found in realisation of who God is, and true worship of Him. God Himself is the foundation of every aspect of the life of His people. If the people have the slightest tendency to idolatry or debased worship, their entire status as the people of God will be threatened. Some sins are more destructive than others. Idolatry and perverted worship is the most fatal dishonour to God, and will entirely destroy the reality of their being the people of God.

Idolatry was supremely the fatal crime – and still is. The people of God could survive despite times of great weakness, but they could not survive times of idolatry. We may learn from this that of all the outrages that God hates, the greatest takes place when He Himself is misrepresented.

□2 20:18-21

□1 20:22
□2 20:23

□3 20:23
□4 20:3

□5 20:4-6

□1 20:24-25

□2 20:26
□3 28:42

□1 Mark 5:15
□2 Luke 8:35



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