

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 20:1-11
“The Ten Words”

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Exodus 20:1-11

Verse 1

And God spoke all these words:

- The Hebrew word here translated “words” is a technical term. It means “covenanted stipulations.” These are the terms of the contract God is offering to Israel. This covenant is known as the Sinaitic Covenant. Israel must decide to accept the terms or reject them. If accepted, the contract will be put in place. If rejected, there will be no contract between God and his people.
- What follows is called the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew they are called the Ten Words. These words are the basis for Israel’s relationship with God.
- (The first four commandments deal with the relationship between God and his people. They tell us how to live in God’s world God’s way. The last six commandments deal with interpersonal relations between God’s people. They tell us how to get along in God’s world God’s way with other people.

Verse 2

“I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

- This is the preamble to the contract. In it, God identifies himself, he is YHWH, and tells what he has done for the people; he brought them out of slavery in Egypt. On the basis of what he has done for them already, Israel should know that he can be trusted to work on their behalf and should, therefore, enter into this contract. If they do, he will continue to act on their behalf.
- The people of Israel are to surrender to God by agreeing to do what he says. The requirement is absolute, voluntary submission to the words of God.

Verse 3

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

- This is the first commandment.
- The word translated “before” means “in hostility to.” It means that God will tolerate no rival gods of any kind. He is to be Israel’s only God.

Verse 4-6

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, YHWH your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

- This is the second commandment.
- An idol is an image cast in wood or stone to represent a god. Since YHWH is spirit, he takes no particular form and therefore no image of him is to be made. As he alone is to be worshiped by the Hebrews, they are not to have any idols among them.
- By saying that he is “jealous,” God means that he will not tolerate Israel’s attention to any other god. He claims exclusive rights to Israel.
- In a Hebrew home at the time these words were written several generations would be present. Therefore, if an Israelite chooses to break the rules of this contract, he will bring God’s punishment upon his entire household.
- On the other hand, God blesses those who choose to honor him for a thousand generations.

Verse 7

“You shall not misuse the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

- This is the third commandment.
- The name of God here mentioned is YHWH.
- To misuse the name means to take a false oath on the authority of the given name. If you are guilty of swearing falsely on the name of God, you will be held guilty by God.

Verse 8-11

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to YHWH your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days YHWH made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

- The word “Sabbath” means rest or set apart as holy. The meanings are combined in this case. The Sabbath is a day of rest. No work is to be done by anyone associated with Israel on this day. It is to set it apart as different, as a day dedicated to YHWH. It remembers God as the creator of the universe and follows his personal example. As he rested on the seventh day, so Israel is to rest on the seventh day.
- The Church changed the day of worship and rest to the first day of the week, Sunday, in honor of the resurrection of Jesus which occurred on the first day of the week.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Ten Words*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)