

THE PURPOSES FOR THE LAW: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE LAW EXODUS 20:18–26

Introduction

Scripture is clear: God gave the Ten Commandments as the basic law to govern all people. But why? Why exactly did God give the Ten Commandments to the world? What were His purposes? What did God have in mind? What were His reasons for instituting the Ten Commandments to be the basic law for all men to obey?

We must understand God's reasons, His purposes for giving the Ten Commandments, in order to gain the greatest benefit from them. A careful study of the present passage tells us why God gave the law. Five very specific purposes can be gleaned from the experience of Israel right after receiving the Ten Commandments. This is the all-important subject of this Scripture: *The Purposes for the Law: Why God Gave the Ten Commandments and the Law*, Exodus 20:18-26.

- I. To reveal the glorious majesty and holiness of God: showing that a great barrier — a great gulf — exists between man and God (v. 18).
- II. To reveal man's need for a mediator, for a person who can approach God on behalf of man (v. 19).
- III. To test man (vv. 20-21).
- IV. To teach that God alone is the Lord: He alone has truly revealed Himself, has spoken to man from heaven (v. 22).
- V. To teach how God alone is to be approached and worshipped (vv. 23-26).

I. *Exodus 20:18 The Ten Commandments Reveal the Holiness, Majesty and Glory of God*

Why did God give the Ten Commandments to man? First, to reveal the glorious majesty and holiness of God's person, to reveal that a great barrier — a great gulf — exists between man and God. Remember what had happened: God's holy presence had descended to the top of Mt. Sinai in what was probably the most spectacular, terrifying storm and cloud ever witnessed upon earth. Note the glorious description: there was...

- thunder and lightning
 - the constant blast of a loud trumpet
 - a flaming fire that engulfed the mountain (19:18)
 - a cloud of bellowing smoke that arose as though from a huge volcanic eruption (19:18)
 - the violent quaking of the mountain that never stopped trembling (19:18)
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The people reacted just as any of us would: they withdrew from the foot of the mountain; they shrunk back from God's holy presence. They feared for their lives; feared lest the holy presence of God strike out at them (v. 19). Obviously, they were sensing a great gulf between the holy presence of God and their own sinful, human nature. They sensed a deep, terrifying distance between the majesty and holiness of God's person and their own human condition, a condition of weakness, failure, shortcoming, and sinfulness. They knew that the majesty of God being displayed upon the mountain, the majesty they were witnessing, could strike them dead at any moment (v. 19). Thus they shrunk back and withdrew from God's holy presence.

This was the very point that God wished to convey to the people: He is the very embodiment of *majestic glory and holiness*. There is a great gulf — a chasm, an abyss, a terrifying separation — between Himself and man, between what He Himself is and what man is. Again, God is the very embodiment of *majestic glory and holiness*; therefore, the very law of God — the Ten Commandments, the very words which God spoke — were holy and glorious (Rom 7:12, 14, 16). The law of God and the Ten Commandments were the very expression of God's being. Therefore, people were to obey God's law or else face the terrifying glory and holiness of God.

Thought 1. This was the first reason God gave the law: to reveal His majestic glory and holiness, that there is a *great gulf*, a terrifying separation between God and man.

Isa 59:2 *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

Isa 64:6 *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

Isa 64:7 *No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.*

Luke 16:26 *“And besides all this, between us [in heaven] and you [in hell] a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”*

Rom 3:23 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

1 John 1:8 *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

Gen 6:5 *The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*

Prov 20:9 *Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?*

II. **Exodus 20:19** *Need for a Mediator between Man and God*

Why did God give the Ten Commandments to man? To reveal man's need for a *mediator*, for a person who can approach God for man, a person who can represent man before God. Apparently, the people had heard the booming voice of God speaking out from the

cloud covering the mountain. Scripture suggests that God's booming voice actually spoke and gave the Ten Commandments directly to the people:

Deu 5:4 The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain.

Deu 5:22-27 These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me. When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leaders of your tribes and your elders came to me. And you said, "The LORD our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a person can live even if God speaks with them. But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer. For what mortal has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? Go near and listen to all that the LORD our God says. Then tell us whatever the LORD our God tells you. We will listen and obey."

Two terrifying events were happening: the people were witnessing the awesome sight of God's glory and majesty, and they were actually hearing the booming voice of God Himself declare the Ten Commandments. Both struck a deep sense of unworthiness in the people. They became keenly aware of the vast difference — the enormous gulf — between God and man, the vast difference...

- between God's holy nature and man's sinful nature
- between God's awesome power and man's helplessness before that power
- between what God is like and what man is like

The sight of God's majestic glory and the hearing of God's booming voice revealed a startling fact to the people: there was a *great gulf* between man and God and the people sensed the *gulf* deeply. They were so aware of God's holiness and their sinfulness — so aware of the vast difference between God's awesome person and their humanity — that they did not want God to speak directly to them, not anymore. They obviously feared some pronouncement of judgment upon them (v. 19).

The point is this: they sensed the need for a mediator, for a person to approach God for them, a person who could represent them before God. They wanted God's messenger to be their mediator: they wanted Moses to approach God, to receive God's message, and then to bring God's message back to them. Note what the people promised: they would hear and obey the word of God (v. 19).

This great sense and need for a mediator led to one of the great promises in Scripture, the promise of God's Perfect Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. As God's Perfect Mediator, Jesus Christ was to stand before God for all people of all ages. Note what Moses himself was later to proclaim to the people:

Deu 18:15-19 *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name."*

Thought 1. The law — that is, our failure to keep the law — shows how far short we come, how far away we are from God. The law shows our great need for a mediator, for someone to approach God and to intercede for us. That Someone, that Person, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our mediator, the person who approaches God for us.

1 Tim 2:5-6 *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men — the testimony given in its proper time.*

Heb 2:14-17 *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.*

Heb 7:25 *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives [as the mediator] to intercede for them.*

Heb 8:6 *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.*

Heb 9:15 *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*

III. **Exodus 20:20–21** *The Test of Obedience*

Why did God give the Ten Commandments to man? To test man. Note the word *fear*, two kinds of fear are mentioned in this verse:

=> A *tormenting fear* (yare): the fear that defeats a person, that keeps a person from acting and doing what he should.

=> A *respectful, honouring fear* (yirah): the fear of God that arouses a person to reverence and obey God.

Moses encouraged the people not to be gripped with a tormenting fear of God. God

was not out to destroy them but to test them. God had actually given them the Ten Commandments to test them (v. 20).

Remember, the people had earlier promised to do all that the Lord had said. They had made a strong profession and commitment to the Lord. Remember what had happened:

Exo 19:7-8 So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

Now the Lord was going to use the Ten Commandments to test the people:

- => To see if the people would truly walk in the fear and reverence of God. He had given the people a glimpse of the majestic glory and holiness of God. Would they keep the sight before their minds and obey the commandments, the commandments given by the Lord of glory and holiness?
- => To see if the people would truly obey God and not sin, not break the Ten Commandments.
- => To see if the people would trust the mediator appointed by God (v. 21). Note that Moses approached the cloud and thick darkness where God was. He was God’s appointed mediator to represent the people before God. Would the people trust and follow him as they journeyed to the promised land?

Thought 1. Did Israel pass the test of God? Tragically, no. Israel did what so many have done down through the ages: promised to obey God and failed to follow through.

- (1) Many have rejected God: refused to walk in the fear and reverence of God.
- (2) Many have disobeyed the Ten Commandments and lived in sin.
- (3) Many have rejected God’s appointed mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Exo 19:5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine.

Exo 23:21 Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him.

Deu 11:26-28 “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse — the blessing if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commandments of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.”

Deu 13:4 It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.

Jos 24:24 And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

1 Sam 15:22 But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

1 Pet 4:17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

IV. Exodus 20:22 Revelation of God Himself, The Only True Lord

Why did God give the Ten Commandments to man? To teach that God alone is the Lord: He alone has truly revealed Himself, has truly spoken to man from heaven. Remember, God’s name — the Lord — means the Lord of salvation, deliverance, redemption and revelation.

Think for a moment about all the so-called gods declared and worshipped by people. No matter who the so-called gods are, there is only one Lord, only one true and living God who can save, deliver and redeem people, who can reveal Himself. Who is He? Note this verse:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven.’” (v. 22).

The Lord truly revealed Himself; He “has talked with you [man] from heaven” (v. 22). The Lord is the only living and true God who has spoken to man and given man the Ten Commandments.

Thought 1. The point is clear: God revealed Himself; He came down upon Mt. Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments to prove that He alone is the Lord who can save and redeem man. Man must, therefore, obey the Lord; man must do what the Lord says to be saved and redeemed.

Mat 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

2 Th 1:7-8 And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Rev 22:14 “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”

Exo 19:5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine.

Deu 26:16 The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul.

1 Sam 12:15 “But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors.”

Heb 2:2-3 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

V. Exodus 20:23–26 Teaching Men How to Approach God and Worship Him

Why did God give the Ten Commandments and the law to man? To teach how God is to be approached and worshipped. Note three instructions spelled out by God.

1. There is to be no idolatry in worship: no so-called (v. 22) gods are to be made or worshipped (v. 23). This, of course, would include the gods of man's imagination, the gods that men dream up. There is only one true and living God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is to be worshipped. No other so-called gods are to be worshipped.
2. Worship is not to be full of pageantry, not to be ostentatious, flashy or showy: the altar was to be made of earth, the plainest and simplest material of all (v. 24). The altar of earth was, of course, to be a temporary centre of worship until the tabernacle was erected. Note: if an altar of stone were to be built, only undressed stones were to be used. The stone was not to be touched by any tool of man. Touching it with any tool or giving any shape to the stone was considered by God to be a defilement (v. 25). The point being made was that worship was to be totally free of any ostentation or flashiness. Worship was not to be showy, not even the focus of worship, which was the altar. Nothing was to distract from the people's worship.
3. Worship was to involve no unrefined or disrespectful behaviour, none whatsoever: the altar was to have no steps (v. 26). In ancient times, it was the common practice to build high altars with steps leading up to the top of the altars. As the priest climbed the steps of the altar, his nakedness was often exposed to the people standing at the bottom of the altar. God was declaring that there was to be no disrespectful behaviour, no immoral behaviour ever associated or conducted in the worship services of His people.

Note this fact as well: altars of that day were built high, symbolizing that man was ascending up to God, offering himself and his offering to the false god. But God forbids this, forbids it for four reasons:

- => Man cannot climb up in righteousness: he has no righteousness to offer up to God.
- => Man cannot ascend up to God. God has to descend down to man (reveal Himself to man).
- => Man cannot climb up and break through to heaven; he cannot enter the spiritual world; God has to enter the physical world.
- => Man cannot climb man-made steps and reach God; the mediator of God has to stand before God for man.

Thought 1. Three lessons are clearly seen in this point.

- (1) We must never approach and worship any person nor any false god dreamed up by man. There is only one true and living God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He and He alone is the one true and living God; consequently, He and He alone is to be approached and worshipped.

Deu 11:16 Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them.

Deu 12:5 But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go.

Psa 33:8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him.

Isa 42:8 "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols."

1 Jn 5:21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

- (2) We must never worship God for show — with a spirit of ostentation or flashiness.

Mat 6:2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

Mat 6:5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

Mat 6:16 "When you fast, do not look dismal as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

Mat 23:5 "Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long."

- (3) We must never be disrespectful nor irreverent in our worship; we must never pollute nor defile our worship.

Exo 3:5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Lev 19:30 "You must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God."

Jos 5:15 The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

Psa 89:7 In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.

Eccl 5:1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

John 2:13-16 *When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”*

1 Tim 3:15 *If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.*

Hab 2:20 *“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” ■*