

Prayer

Lord Jesus: why do we come back to you with our problems, as if they can never be solved? Lead us to listen to You more carefully, to attend to Your word with greater attention, and seek the assistance of those You can use to help us. Then, as we make ourselves vulnerable, may we let the church of God perform its true ministry on us, and receive our healing. We praise You, Lord Jesus, for Your love: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Offer special thanks to God before and after your meals today, and also when you have a snack.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the police.** *Pray about how police and law enforcement agencies in your country are organised, especially for any contentious issues*
- *Pray for the United Kingdom as its citizens important choices in the coming general election*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of His Word*

Meditation

Come close to us today, Lord Jesus,
come close to us as we do our daily work;
for You know what work means for body, mind and spirit.

When we are working hard,
speak a timely word to us that we may hear;
for You are as much involved in what we do as ourselves.

When we take a well-earned break,
clear our heads that we may gain Your perspective;
for Your greater vision will inspire us on to greater things.

When we need to act decisively,
give us moral courage to stand for what is right;
for only by Your guidance can our work be for the good.

When we face tiresome routines,
encourage us to care for even the smallest detail;
for You have never given up on us or stopped Your caring!

Bible passage – Exodus 20:22-26

²² The LORD said to Moses: This is what you will say to the Israelites: 'You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make anything to compete with me, you shall not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

²⁴ You will make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your whole burnt offerings and your fellowship offerings, your sheep and your cattle, then wherever I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ But if you make an altar of stone for me, do not build it of cut stone; for you will defile it if you wield a tool on it. ²⁶ You will not go up by steps to my altar, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.'

Bible Study

Review

These few verses at the end of chapter 20 appear straightforward, but are very interesting, nevertheless. The whole of this passage is a speech by the Lord to Moses, giving a series of instructions about the second commandment ('you will not make for yourself an idol' – 20:4) and the about the building of altars. The details seem odd to us, because altars are not important to us, and we would scarcely know what difference it might make for altar stones to be cut or uncut, for example (20:25). Such details clearly meant something to ancient people, but in general, the passage answers an important question raised by the whole chapter. How could people worship such an awesome God when they were scared to come near to Him?

From tomorrow we will study chapter 21, and read some more of the Law revealed by God to Moses. It would not be worth the revelation, however, if the people were unwilling to worship their God, or did not know what kind of worship was acceptable to Him. As we think about this, we must continue to remember that the Israelites had travelled on a very rapid spiritual journey since they had been led out of Egypt. Their cultural background in Egypt led them to believe that gods should be worshipped through the making of idols, which were visual reminders of these gods. So, now that idols were banned (20:4f.), how should the Israelites worship? Furthermore, religious ceremonies were conducted with the highest degree of ceremony and dignity, and using all the skills of art and technology available (see, for example, the incredibly fine examples of this found in Egyptian tombs of that period, such as that of Tutankhamen). Practically, the desert made all this very difficult, so what worship was appropriate for the awesome God they had just met, especially in the desert!

Firstly, the Israelites had to remember that God revealed Himself to His people through speaking to them. This sounds straightforward to us, but the Israelites would never have come across anything like this before. This is why this passage emphasises that God is a God who speaks; '*... I spoke with you from heaven*' (20:22). This 'Word of the Lord' did not come from their leader, Moses, but came directly from God. The more we read Exodus, the more we can see this emphasis on God's revelation by speech, whether in His revelation to Moses (chapters 3,4) or in the confrontations with Pharaoh (chapters 6-9). So now, God told the people to abandon all forms of worship involving objects that might be thought to represent Him. No object, however beautiful or however lovingly or skilfully made, could represent the awesomeness of a God who spoke with power and authority.

God only allowed His people to worship Him through the rituals of sacrifice, in other words, by giving themselves to Him in this ancient symbolic way. The text mentions two forms of sacrifice, the 'whole burnt offering' and the 'fellowship' offering. At this point in time, before complex commandments were given about such rituals (as in Leviticus), these represented two important aspects of worship. The 'whole burnt offering' was a pure gift to God, and the 'fellowship offering' was an expression of community sharing and celebration that included God (for details, see the study below). In addition, the Israelites were told that God did not require any elaborate altar. A heap of earth (20:24) or a pile of stones (20:25) was sufficient. These did not require special craftsmanship and effort, energy that was wasted while travelling through the desert. God told them that they should worship Him wherever they were blessed by Him (20:24), just as their forefathers Abraham and Isaac had done (see Gen 12:7, 13:4, 22:9 etc.).

Later, we will explore other significant details within this text, but this text is essentially about how God's people should worship a God who revealed Himself by speaking, and the instructions were simplicity itself. This was essential for a people on the move, and a God who was not represented by any ritual or image.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What did Moses really mean to say (20:22,23) about 'the commandments', and heaven?
- Why did God ask for an altar of earth and not 'cut stone'?
- What are whole burnt offerings and fellowship offerings; why did God want them?
- Why no steps to the altar?

Notes on the text and translation

V23 *'You shall not make anything to compete with me ...'* The Hebrew here is obscure, and it is in fact a double command. Most translators roll together the first part of the verse with the rest, producing 'you shall not make gods of silver to be with me ...' (English Standard Version). In fact, the first part of the verse stands alone rather awkwardly to read 'you will not make alongside me', where the word

'make' is entirely abstract, and the sense of the phrase is to ban anything 'man-made' alongside God. I have attempted to convey this as simply as possible, leaving the second half of the verse ('you shall not make for yourself gods of silver or gods of gold') to read in English exactly what it says in the Hebrew.

V24 'your sheep' *The Hebrew word for sheep simply means 'small cattle', and is a general term for both sheep and goats*

V25 'wherever I cause my name to be remembered' *This sounds strange to us, but it is exactly as the Hebrew says. The meaning of the phrase is linked to the general idea of 'remembrance' of the Lord, which is found throughout the Old Testament and refers to a significant meeting between God and His people.*

V26 'lest your nakedness be exposed' *I have kept the traditional way of translating this, because the Hebrew word indicates exposure of the genitals, and it remains best not to make an issue of this by translating the word too literally.*

Going Deeper

What did Moses really say about 'heaven' and 'the commandments' (20:22,23)?

Verses 22 and 23 are interesting because they represent an important point in the giving of the law. The Ten Commandments were given by the voice of God (see 20:1), but because the people of Israel could not bear the sound of God's voice, they pleaded for Moses to be their priest; the one who spoke God's words to them (20:18,19). Of course, Moses had spoken God's words before (see above), but now the stakes were higher, because of the giving of the law. By telling Moses 'this is what you will say to the Israelites ...', God gave authority to Moses to speak on His behalf and deliver His law.

In tomorrow's reading, beginning chapter 21:1, it becomes clear that all the law given subsequently was in fact given through Moses; only the Ten Commandments were spoken by God alone, and this is confirmed by Moses' reference to God speaking from 'heaven' in our reading (verse 22). We have read that the people were at the foot of Sinai, that Moses had gone up the mountain to speak to God, and come down again (more than once in chapter 19), but when the Ten Commandments were spoken, God had come on Mount Sinai, speaking 'from heaven'. Sinai was the earthly place where for this, but God did not 'leave' heaven to speak (as Jesus did for example); He gave the Ten Commandments from heaven, via Sinai.

It is perhaps because of Moses' new authority to speak God's law that his next words were to repeat the first two commandments (20:23). Most Bible notes on this verse say that it repeats the second commandment, 'you shall not make for yourself an idol'. However, if you have read the notes on this verse above, you will know that there are problems with the Hebrew here. My translation finds two commandments in verse 23, and these compare with both the first and the second commandments. They are set out below to compare them with the first and second commandments.

'You shall have no other gods but me' – the first commandment (20:3).

'You shall not make anything to compete with me' – Moses' repeat (20:23)

'You shall not make for yourself an idol' – the second commandment (20:4)

'You shall not make ... gods of silver or gods of gold' – Moses' repeat (20:23)

It is significant that Moses begins in this way, because it confirms again his authority to speak on God's behalf. The first two commandments highlight the exclusive and unique nature of God that separate Him from all human imitations; but now, Moses has become His mouthpiece.

Why did God ask for an altar of earth and not 'cut stone'?

The instructions about making an altar are remarkable. Later depictions of the altar given in the law itself are grand and elaborate (see Exodus 27), but the starting point for the people of Israel was to be utterly basic, in fact, the altar itself was entirely disposable. Remarkably, some archaeological evidence has survived from those times to verify the existence of altars made of compacted earth, and some with a mixture of earth and stones; anything, in fact, that could be found in the desert to make an altar! The basic nature of this altar is shown in Hebrew, where the word for 'earth' is the word 'adamah', the same 'earth' out of which 'man' (Adam) was made (as in Genesis 2:7)!

Controversy rages over the reason for the ban on cutting stones, if stone were to be used to make an altar. Certainly, there were some tribal beliefs in ancient times that stones contained spirits that would be released by striking them, but there is no real evidence that this plays a part here in this text. The comment that defines the matter is this; 'for you will defile it if you wield a tool on it' (20:25). So it is far more likely that the shaping and manufacture of stones for an altar indicated human effort and achievement at the very place

where God alone was to be worshipped. In a similar way, we might complain today that people look at the wonderful carved objects used as communion tables and altars in churches and say 'what wonderful artistry', instead of 'what a wonderful God'!

What are whole burnt offerings and fellowship offerings; why did God want them?

The instructions given for worship are that the Israelites were to offer whole burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. What were these sacrifices, and what did they mean? Clearly, whole burnt offerings were exactly this, whole animals slaughtered and offered to God in their entirety, burned to symbolise the complete giving of the animal to God; God had given the life to the animal, and it was then given back to God. This was the origin of unconditional worship given to God, and although we do not worship with sacrifices today, we can learn a great deal from this principle of unconditional giving in worship.

What some do not recognise is that the principle of un-conditionality comes before the idea of the 'giving of the best'. People often equate the 'whole burnt offering' principle with this idea, but the notion of only giving what is best is given later, in the book of Leviticus. It is always right to start with the most basic principles and build from there if we want to understand the nature of what God requires. Certainly, the Lord calls for our best, but before that, He calls us to give ourselves to Him unconditionally; that is the start of worship.

The fellowship offering is more interesting, because in its primitive form (before its elaboration in Leviticus 3f.) the sacrifice was offered for any human reason that made someone want to worship God, for example, to praise Him for recovery from an illness, or safe passage on a journey, or perhaps simply on a festive occasion. The people had been instructed to remember the escape from Egypt with the feast of Passover, for example, and the slaughtering of a lamb to share as a meal was one kind of 'fellowship offering'. Interestingly, the word 'fellowship' is a translation of that famous Hebrew word 'shalom', which means many things, including 'peace', 'completion', 'fellowship' and 'wholeness'. Indeed, it might be helpful if we called this sacrifice the 'shalom' offering, because the word conjures a wide range of possible meanings in our minds, as it should for this form of worship. The principle of 'shalom' worship therefore is celebratory and thanksgiving worship; it is not done as an obligation like the 'unconditional' worship previously mentioned; it is an expression of human delight and pleasure in God.

Why no steps to the altar?

There are a number of reasons why there were to be no steps to the altar. Many ancient religions had altars high on steps to indicate graphically and dramatically the supremacy of the gods! The Lord God would have no such thing (20:26). Later altars in Israel were created with steps; it is believed the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem had them although this is not specifically mentioned in the Bible; and Ezekiel's vision of the Temple also contains steps (Ez 40:22f.). In order to understand why this became more acceptable, we have to understand the specific reason given here in this passage for the ban on steps.

The text here says that steps should not be made 'lest your nakedness be exposed on it' (20:26). To put it simply, if the altar was high up on steps, then as the priests ascended, you could see their private parts! For this reason, instructions were later given to Moses for the clothing of priests that specifically mentions 'undergarments' (not a usual feature of Israelite clothing – see Exodus 28:40-42). All this means that the instructions given here in this passage about the making and use of altars was something of a starting point in the journey of worship that lay ahead of the people of Israel. Nevertheless, they had to get the principles right!

Application

From this passage, we find ourselves dwelling on some of the essential features of the worship of God. Firstly, the honouring of God for who He is, as indicated in the first and the second commandments. It is a repeated mantra today to say that we worship God 'for who He is and for what He has done', but it is hard to find people who can tell what the difference is between the two. The best way to respect God in worship is however, to start with a focus on the first and the second commandments, which speak about the unique and awesome purity and perfection of God; He is One and He is unique, and He cannot be copied in any way.

The use of the altars in this passage also indicate to us that we do well to distinguish between giving worship to God unconditionally because it is right to do so, and secondly, enjoying our worship because we want to give it. Both are necessary, and both relate to the ideas found in 'whole burnt offerings' and 'fellowship (shalom) offerings'. It is surely wise for us to find a balance between these two aspects of our worship of God, for one without the other may not reflect the truest of Biblical traditions.

The last thing we can say about worship from this text is that in the middle (20:24), God says that worship can be offered wherever the Lord is remembered. Indeed, He will bless His people as they remember Him. This is like an open invitation to us to worship the Lord our God whenever we are led to do so, any time, any place!. Of course, there are times when we need to come together with other Christians to worship on a

regular and structured basis. But surely, if we do not know how to worship the Lord in the course of our lives, according to His blessing of us, then we have not caught the original spirit of worship that comes from a real relationship with God.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways do people make gods of silver and gods of gold today? How can we prevent this happening?
2. What might be the equivalent of 'whole burnt offerings' in Christian worship today?
3. What might be the equivalent of 'fellowship offerings' in Christian worship today?

Personal comments by author

This passage reminds me that whatever else we do, unless we are worshipping the Lord God, then we are missing out in our relationship with the living God. There seems to me to be two ways in which this is done, and the one cannot suffice for the other. Scripture assumes that we worship God with others who believe, but we also need to know that we can worship God in spirit and in truth by ourselves, or in our families, when we are blessed by the Lord to do this. Such worship is true liberty; it is not restricted to 'church'.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on what the first two commandments say to you about the Lord your God, and how you should worship Him. Over the coming days, let these two great commands of God instruct your thoughts and prayers.*
 - *Pray for the life of the church, and the many disputes that people have about worship and what should or should not be done. Pray that God's people will get a true perspective for worshipping the living God.*
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Final Prayer

We rejoice, Lord God, at the incredible nature of the life You have given us. May we never cease to wonder at the gift of life, or fail to be thankful for the amazing things that happen around us, or allow the love with which we are surrounded to go unnoticed. Open our hearts, our minds and our feelings to the world in which we are set, Lord God: AMEN
