

## **Bible Study # 34 Exodus 20.8–21 03–17–2021**

### ***4. The Fourth Word (20:8-11)***

The Fourth Word is the longest of them all. It deals with the structuring of time to follow God's own pattern, for he worked and then entered into his sabbatical rest. The opening word, 'Remember' could be interpreted to mean, 'remember the Sabbath that has already been enjoined upon you'. However, it is more likely that it means 'remember' in the sense of 'remember to keep'.

The instruction is to sanctify, that is, to set aside as holy, the seventh day. The other six days are designated as days on which work is to be performed. On the seventh day all the family members, the servants, the aliens living in the community, and even the animals were to do no work. The reason given for this pattern is that the Lord made the heavens and the earth in six days, and then rested.

This rest was not that of a weary workman, but the rest of satisfaction and joy in that the whole of creation corresponded to God's purpose. His own example was to be the motivating factor in Sabbath observance. The concluding statement of verse 11 is a strong echo of Genesis 2:3: 'So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in his creation' (esv).

The seventh day was special among the creation days, in that it was the only one that was consecrated by being set apart. The later description of the Sabbath as belonging to the Lord (Exod. 31:15) indicates how significant the Sabbath was as a covenantal sign.

When this Word was reaffirmed in the covenant made just prior to the entry of Israel into Canaan, the reason for observing the Sabbath was altered from creation to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (Deut. 5:15). Thus the observance of the Sabbath was meant to enable the people to remember 'the two great benefits of creation and redemption'.

The Sabbath was important for other reasons also, for the sabbatical principle (six + one) was extended to the seventh year, the year for cancelling debts (Deut. 15:1-6), the release of bonded servants (Deut. 15:12-18) and allowing the land to lie fallow (Exod. 23:10-11).

The last of these provides a significant link between the Sabbath and creation. The Sabbath is rooted in God's blessing of it following His creative activity, and the sabbatical year allowed the ground to rest and be refreshed.

### ***5. The Fifth Word (20:12)***

The Fifth Word focuses on family relationships, and especially the respect for parents. This is the first commandment with a promise, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Eph. 6:2). The verb here, 'honor', has a variety of meanings. It is used of honoring and esteeming other human beings, but it is also used for the response of worship given to God (1 Sam. 2:30; Ps. 86:9; Prov. 3:9; Isa. 24:15).

These Ten Words were addressed to adults, and this suggests that something more than just obedience of children to their parents is in view here. The latter part of this Word confirms this fact, in the reference to having long life in the land that God had sworn to give to His people.

Long life would depend on obedience to God's instructions, and also by recognition of His appointed representatives, including parents, who would exercise His rule. The elders in Israel had an important role in maintaining good order, and the family was the primary means of passing on knowledge of the Lord (cf. Deut. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:1-8). Inherent in this Word is a warning. Failure to show respect to parents would amount to rebellion against God, and very abruptly, the people would be deprived of occupancy of the land.

Ezekiel mentions disrespect for parents as one of the sins that caused the exile (Ezek. 22:7). As the New Testament makes plain, obedience to parents must be in recognition of their God-given role in the family and yielded as unto the Lord himself (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20).

### **6. *The Sixth Word (20:13)***

This Word is the first of three that have a common short formula: 'Do not + verb.' In Hebrew they consist of a negative particle plus a verbal form. This is not the usual mode of negation in Hebrew, but a form reserved, in the main, for use in legal literature, particularly of divine commands.

Behind this prohibition lies the biblical teaching on the image of God in man (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6). The sanctity of human life had to be respected, for it was precious in God's sight. The verb used is not the most common one for kill or put to death. Here the verb is one that can denote killing in general, or murder, or manslaughter.

No object is stated for the verb, so the open expression could include both murder and suicide. Various exemptions were to apply. It was applicable to humans only, and it did not include capital punishment, defense of one's home (Exod. 22:2), accidental deaths (Deut. 19:5), or loss of life in wartime.

This Word also makes no distinction between social classes of either the murderer or the victim. Deliberate and malicious action causing death is prohibited without any restriction excusing a particular group or class from its breadth.

### **7. *The Seventh Word (20:14)***

Another sanctity that had to be preserved was the marriage bond, that had to be guarded from sexual impurity. This Seventh Word stands in marked contrast to the infidelity and promiscuity of other religious life in the Near East. The verb here is used of both men and women, though predominantly of men.

It is employed of sexual intercourse of a man with another man's wife (Lev. 20:10), and of intercourse of a wife with a man, presumably a married man (Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 4:13). The general form of this prohibition is against sexual relationships between people, at least one of whom is considered as married to someone else. No distinction was intended between married women and those who were betrothed (Deut. 22:22-24).

If this prohibition was breached, it was regarded as primarily a sin against God (cf. Joseph's words, 'How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' Gen. 39:9). In general, if the oneness established by God in the beginning is breached (Gen. 1:27; 2:18, 23-24), then adultery has taken place.

The marriage bond was to be regarded as inviolable, and this may well have been for other associated reasons as well, especially in relation to the transmission of property to the following generation. The way in which the prophets link adultery with the worship of what are no-gods (Jer. 5:7) demonstrates how seriously this prohibition was regarded. The same word as used here for 'commit adultery' is also employed in reference to Israel's breach of covenantal fidelity in introducing idolatry (Isa. 57:3-13; Jer. 3:6-9; Ezek. 23:36-49).

### **8. *The Eighth Word (20:15)***

A further sanctity that had to be preserved was possession of property and, more widely, the preservation of relationships that can be so easily disrupted by theft. Individuals and society as a whole have rights that must be respected. For the third successive Word, a verb is used without an object, giving this prohibition the most general setting possible.

The verb itself is speaking of acts of theft done secretly, without the knowledge or consent of the owner. It relates to both stealing and kidnapping (Exod. 21:16). God was the owner of all (Ps. 24:1), but He entrusted his gifts to human beings, and the use of property had to be respected. Even those in debt, who were forced to sell their property (or themselves as slaves), saw it returned to them in the sabbatical or jubilee years (Exod. 21:2-4; Lev. 25:23-34; Deut. 15:1-11).

Clearly practices that are not so openly breaches of this Word were included, including holding back the wages of a worker (Lev. 19:13), dishonest business practices (Lev. 19:35), or charging exorbitant rates of interest (Lev. 25:16). Life in community must be protected, and abuse of property rights distorts seriously the functioning of society.

Even the highest levels of society were not exempt from this Word, as was demonstrated in the case of Ahab's misappropriation of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-29). Justice was a significant issue in Israel, and there is frequent condemnation by the prophets of injustices perpetrated in particular by the nobility and wealthy (cf. Isa. 1:21-23; Amos 5:12-17).

### ***9. The Ninth Word (20:16)***

In legal cases there was another sanctity that had to be respected, and that was the sanctity of truth. Any false speech (lying) and any false actions (stealing) were both practices that were to be set aside by believing Israel (see Lev. 19:11). The primary reference here is to a court scene in which a member of the Israelite community bears false witness against another member who was on trial.

This concept was far broader than just a law court situation is shown by the alteration in Deuteronomy 5 of 'false, fraudulent' to 'nothingness, emptiness'. In both Exodus and Deuteronomy there are passages that expand this Word to prohibit lying in general (Exod. 23:1-3; Deut. 17:6; 19:15-21; 22:5, 13-21).

### ***10. The Tenth Word (20:17)***

The tenth and final Word is different from the preceding ones in that it deals with an issue that may never express itself in an outward way, or even lead to another sin. It prohibits having a desire to obtain possession of what belongs to one's neighbor, something known only to the person concerned and to God. In view are inward motives, not outward actions.

Here, the Hebrew verb for 'covet' occurs twice, while in the reissuing of the Ten Words in Deuteronomy, the second verb is changed to another verb meaning 'crave' or 'desire' (Deut. 5:21). This latter verb is more neutral as it is used elsewhere of legitimate, good desires. As the final Word, this one, in one sense, summarizes all the others.

Illicit desire was the root from which all other sins would spring. Both Old and New Testaments teach that coveting comes from the heart (Proverbs. 6:25), and ultimately it expresses itself in an outward action (James. 1:14-15). The list in this Word (house, wife, male and female servants, ox, and donkey) is typical of similar lists in the Ancient Near East).

The final clause ('or anything that is your neighbor's') points to it indicating objects of desire rather than being a comprehensive list of what a man owned. Though not necessarily an outward sin, the seriousness of coveting is reinforced by Paul's equation of it with idolatry (Col. 3:5).

These verses continue to describe the theophany that took place on the occasion of the giving of the Ten Words. It has to be understood in the light of the description given in the previous chapter (Exod. 19:16-25) and the fuller account in Deuteronomy 5:22-31, and also the reference to the events after the giving of the law in Deuteronomy 9:7-12. Several facts emphasize the uniqueness of what happened on Mount Sinai.

It involved dramatic visual and audible effects (cloud, thunder, lightning, smoke, the trumpet sound). The difference between the Ten Words and their subsequent exposition in both Exodus and Deuteronomy is marked by the statement that God added nothing further to them (Deut. 5:22), and by the way in which they were recorded on tablets of stone by the finger of God (Exod. 24:12; Deut. 5:22; 9:10). It is clear from Exodus 34:28 that what was on the stone tablets was indeed 'the Ten Words'.

The exposition of the Ten Words in the Book of the Covenant that follows (20:22-23:33) is preceded by a description of the reaction of the people to the theophany. The opening words of verse 18 ('the people saw the thunder ... and the sound of the trumpet') may seem strange to Westerners but the Hebrew verb 'to see' has a range of extended meanings that include 'perceive' and 'become aware of'.

The use of the participle conveys the idea that the people 'were perceiving' over a period of time, and thus implying that this perception included the divine revelation in chapters 19 and 20. The response of the people was that 'they saw and trembled'. The repetition of the idea of seeing simply reinforces the point that the people were well aware of the extended theophany.

The effect on the people was that they shook with fear (cf. the use of the exact same verb to describe the doorposts shaking in Isaiah 6:4) and they retreated to a position far away from the mountain. They did not want any direct communication between themselves and God, lest that caused their death.

Instead, they wanted the mediator, Moses, to be the one who made known to them God's messages. Moses' response to the people's fear and his acceptance of his role as mediator is to command them not to be afraid. His explanation is given in two parallel clauses, both of which use the preposition 'in order that'.

The first explanation is that God had come to them in order to test them, that is, to ascertain how they reacted to his presence and his verbal revelation in the Ten Words. The second was that fear of God might keep them from sinning. The expression here, 'fear of God', is a precursor of the later 'fear of the Lord' that denoted the heartfelt devotion of a servant to the will of the sovereign Master.

The people had to understand that God had manifested himself in glory, and their duty was to respond in obedience to his demands upon them. They had been confronted by God's presence in the theophany, and now, conscious of their covenantal relationship with him, they are called to refrain from sinning against him.

The people maintained their distance from God, while Moses then approached the thick darkness where God was. The word used of God in verses 18-21 (as in v. 1) is not 'the LORD' (yhwh) but 'elohîm, possibly to draw attention to His majesty.

Two descriptions of this experience of Moses and the people are significant. In Deuteronomy 4:11, Moses reminded the people how they 'came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud and gloom (esv)'.

Then, much later, the writer to the Hebrews contrasted the experience of Israel at Sinai, coming to 'a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest' (Heb. 12:18), with the experience of Christian believers coming 'to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb. 12:22). Moses, in addition to all the people, was so filled with awe that he declared: 'I tremble with fear' (Heb. 12:21).

Our study will continue with 20.22–21.11.