

The LORD now leads the children of Israel to Mount Sinai (the mountain where He spoke to Moses from the burning bush) and they set up camp near its base. Once they had prepared themselves to meet the LORD, He manifested His presence on the mountain with fire and smoke. He then presented the ten commandments that are the core of the moral law given by God.

**Exodus 19:1-16:** The people arrive at Mount Sinai and set up their camp near the base of the mountain. Moses ascends the mountain and the LORD gives him a message for the people reminding them of how He delivered them from Egypt. He then says that if they will obey Him then He will bless them as His people. When the people agree, they are instructed to sanctify themselves over the next two days because on the third day the LORD would meet with them. They were also warned that neither man nor beast were to violate the sacredness of the mountain (due to the presence of the LORD) by crossing its boundaries under penalty of death before the time of the meeting with the LORD, which would be signified by the sounding of a trumpet.

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### Exodus 19

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.

**“And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God”** – The morning of the third day arrived and Moses brings the people to the mountain to meet God. The evidence of His presence could be seen at the top of the mountain because it was covered with smoke and they could see and hear thunder, lightning and the sound of a loud trumpet (v. 16). These things caused the people to tremble in fear.

**“and they stood at the nether [lower] part of the mount”** – Moses had the people gather in the lower part of the mountain because only specific people would be allowed to ascend the mountain and experience firsthand the presence of God.

18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

The mountain was completely covered in smoke because of the presence of God manifested in fire, similar to when the LORD appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush (Ex. 3:2). The awesomeness of the presence of God caused the mountain to quake and smoke to billow up like smoke coming out of a furnace. The psalmist speaks of the earth shaking in the presence of God in **Psa. 68:8** when he said *“The earth shook, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God: even Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel.”*

19 And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

The sound of the trumpet got louder and louder, signifying that it was time for the meeting between the LORD and the people to commence. Moses began speaking to the LORD and the LORD answered with an audible voice, apparently one that the people could hear.

**Exodus 19:20-25:** The LORD calls Moses to the top of the mountain and then instructs him to warn the people in case any curiosity seekers decided to climb the mountain in hopes of seeing the LORD. He also commands that the priests sanctify themselves for the priestly work they will be performing in the future. The LORD then sends Moses down with instructions to bring Aaron with him next time.

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### Exodus 20

1 And God spake all these words, saying, 2 I *am* the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

The LORD now gives the Ten Commandments, speaking aloud from the top of the mountain. Before giving the commandments, God reminds the people that He is the LORD, the God of Israel, and that He is the One Who freed them from the bondage of Egypt. These facts alone give Him more than enough authority to issue these commandments to Israel. These ten commandments can be split into two broad categories. The first four commandments deal with a person’s relationship with God, while the other six deal with a person’s relationship with other people.

3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

The Hebrew behind the words “before me” literally mean “before my face.” Most other people-groups were polytheistic (worshiping multiple gods) but this first commandment says that Israel is to worship the LORD alone. They are not to worship Him as the foremost of all the gods they served but He is to be the only God they serve.

4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; 6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

**“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them”** – This second commandment expands on the theme of the first. The prohibition is not against creating an image as a form of artistic expression. In fact, the building of the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the bronze altars and other articles to be used in the tabernacle involved creating images of things prohibited here. This commandment is a prohibition against creating images for the purpose of worshiping them. They were to have no other gods before the LORD and creating any image to be worshiped was expressly forbidden. By forbidding the creation of an image of “any thing that is in heaven above” also implies that we are not even to create images representing God Himself to worship. The image is not God and we are to worship Him alone. No image could ever reproduce His glory and would actually be an insult to Him.

**“for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God”** – The Hebrew word translated “jealous” here is only used to refer to God. Human jealousy is selfish and self-serving, while the LORD’s jealousy is not. The Hebrew word here is rooted in the idea of a mother bird’s aggressive protection of her young. The LORD knows the spiritual harm that will come to His people if they forsake Him to worship idols and so He zealously punishes those who worship idols and rewards those who love and obey Him. The idea is to discourage idolatry and encourage worship of the one true God.

“visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” – The LORD does not punish the children for the sins of their father (Deut. 24:16) but they do indirectly suffer from the consequences of their parent’s sin. The LORD wants to discourage people from traveling down the road to spiritual ruin and so He allows the consequences of sin to go even beyond the perpetrator. Like our body’s ability to sense pain enables us to avoid dangerous situations, the suffering due to sin enables us to recognize its dangers.

“And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments” – The LORD also rewards those who love Him as an incentive to love and obey Him.

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7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

The name of the LORD is a sacred and holy thing, so to use it irreverently is to use it blasphemously. However, it seems here that this commandment refers to using the LORD’s name when swearing and oath. To use the name of the LORD to add creditability to a statement (“As the LORD lives I will do this thing”) and then not do it is to associate the LORD with your lie and bring reproach upon His name. The LORD will not overlook the sin of treating His name in such an irreverent manner and associating Him with falsehood.

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8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

The Hebrew word for “sabbath” means “to cease.” Verses 10-11 explain that Israel was to follow the example that the LORD set when creating the world: He worked six days and rested (ceased His labors) on the seventh. In the same manner, Israel was to honor the LORD by working six days of the week and then ceasing their labors on the seventh in order to recognize His sabbath (His cessation of labor). This commandment also foreshadows the rest that we have in Christ because our salvation is complete in Him. **Hebrews 4:9-10** “*There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.*”

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12 Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

In Ephesians 6:1-3, the Apostle Paul describes this commandment as being the first commandment that had a promise attached to it. The promise is that honoring your parents opens the door to the LORD’s blessing. The implication is that not honoring one’s parents will lead to disciplinary action that might cause them to be removed from the land (such as happened with their captivity in Babylon) or even shorten their life (**Eph. 6:3** “*That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth*”). Respect for authority is an important virtue that is taught throughout the scriptures, and after the LORD, our parents are the first authorities in our life.

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13 Thou shalt not kill.

The Hebrew word for “kill” refers to murder. This commandment is not a prohibition against taking a life for any reason, for the Bible has many examples of killing with the approval of God. Such examples include being put to death for capital crimes (Num. 35:17-21; Gen. 9:5-6) and the slaying of the enemy in times of war (Deut. 20:10-15). Murder is the taking of a life without legal or moral justification and to do so meant the forfeiture of your own life (**Ex. 21:12** “*He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death*”).

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14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Adultery is the violation of the sacredness of the marital relationship and was punishable by death (Lev. 20:10). It is described as “a great sin” (Gen. 20:9) and a “great wickedness and sin against God” (Gen. 39:9). While this commandment forbids the act, Jesus later addresses the root of the sin being in the heart (**Matt. 5:27-28** “*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart*”).

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15 Thou shalt not steal.

The Hebrew word for “steal” refers to thievery and also carries the idea of taking something through deception. It is to take possession of the property of someone else without their permission.

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16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

While there are many scriptures that condemn dishonesty, deceit and outright lying, this commandment seems to be specifically against telling lies about someone else. This would include slander and false accusations. We are not to attempt to destroy the reputation of others.

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17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

The Hebrew word for “covet” means “to desire; to delight in.” If we begin to desire the things that belong to others we may be tempted to steal such things. To desire the things of others also makes us materialistic and unsatisfied with the things that God has given us, which itself is a sin.

One commentator said that these last three commandments forbid us from harming our neighbor in deed (v. 15), in word (v. 16) and in thought (v. 17).

**Verses 18-25:** As the LORD was speaking to Moses, the people backed away from the mountain, being intimidated by the smoke, the thunder and lightning and the loud trumpet. They begged Moses to tell them what the LORD had to say rather than the LORD speaking directly to them because they feared that they would die. Moses replied that the LORD presented Himself this way intentionally in order to give them an incentive to not sin. Moses then made his way deeper into the thick darkness of the smoke to where God was. There the LORD commanded that the children of Israel not make gods of silver or gold. He also gave instructions concerning the building of altars on which to offer burnt sacrifices to Him.