

WEEK 2: NO OTHER GODS

PREFACE/FIRST COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:2–3; Deuteronomy 5:6–7



The Place of the Passage

This week we take up the preface and the first commandment. The preface, “I am the LORD your God . . .” (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6), orients us to the entire series of commands. It shows that the Ten Commandments are not ways to earn salvation. They guide a person’s response to salvation *after* receiving it. The opening clause, “I am the LORD your God,” also indicates the Decalogue’s character as a covenant¹ (Deut. 5:1–5). These are stipulations that define a relationship. Note there are no consequences attached to any of these commandments. They are exhortations in response to the deliverance from slavery already granted. The preface is followed by the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). This command lays the cornerstone for all the commandments that follow. It also begins the first part of the Decalogue by focusing attention on a right relationship with God. The Decalogue’s second part issues laws about right relationships with others.

The Big Picture

God takes the initiative in salvation, and he gives himself to his people in a covenant of love.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the passage. (It is identical in both Exodus and Deuteronomy.) Also read the introduction to the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5:1–5. Use the provided questions to help you think about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 175–176, 339–340; online at www.esv.org.)

The Preface (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6)

God introduces himself with a phrase that invokes his covenant name “Yahweh,” translated “LORD.” (On the name Yahweh, see the *ESV Study Bible* notes on Ex. 3:14–15, page 149.) He further identifies with the people as “*your God*.” What does this form of self-identification reveal about the relational nature of God?

The preface connects God’s identity as “the LORD your God” with his work as the people’s deliverer from bondage. How does the exodus generation’s experience coming “out of the land of Egypt” represent every believer’s experience of God’s grace?

Theologians point out that God’s salvation of the people precedes his teaching them his laws. It was not obedience to God’s law that led to their salvation but

the reverse. God's grace comes first, and obedience is the people's proper response. How does the preface establish that order of grace and obedience in the Decalogue?

The First Commandment (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7)

The phrase "before me" (lit., "before my face") indicates God's concern that the people not adopt other gods in addition to him. Why do you suppose the command gives special attention to the danger of taking additional gods along with the Lord, rather than the danger of displacing him completely?

Israel was at risk of adopting the gods of Canaan, worshipping Canaanite idols throughout the land while also maintaining the tabernacle of the Lord. What "other gods" of your communities threaten your exclusive devotion to the Lord today?

Most of the Ten Commandments are stated as prohibitions (things not to do). But the corollary, positive exhortations are also thereby implied. What is the positive exhortation indicated by the first commandment? How does a person pursue that in his or her life?

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The first commandment establishes biblical faith as placed in the one true God, a doctrine known as *monotheism*. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 teaches us the implication this conviction should have on our hearts, minds, and labors. Read that passage and describe several ways in which monotheism can be pursued practically in your life.

Introduction to the Deuteronomy Decalogue (Deut. 5:1–5)

When Moses retaught the Decalogue to the people one generation after Mount Sinai, he introduced it as a covenant. What are some of the other covenants God made with his people (see Gen. 9:9–17; 17:1–7; 2 Sam. 23:5; Heb. 12:24)? How does your church understand the relationship between these Old Testament covenants and the new covenant in Christ (Jer. 31:31–34)?

God first gave the Decalogue “face to face at the mountain” in his own voice. Encountering God directly was a fearful experience, so God appointed Moses to mediate the further teaching of his words to the people. How does the role of Moses at Mount Sinai foreshadow the office perfectly fulfilled by Christ (Deut. 5:4–5, 22–33; Heb. 3:1–6)?

With all these considerations of God’s love in Moses’ introduction to the Decalogue, what should our attitude be as we begin our study of the Decalogue’s various commandments?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

REDEMPTION. The Decalogue’s preface recounts God’s grace to Israel in its exodus from Egypt. The Decalogue’s commandments show the holiness that God then renews in his people through their sanctification.² The exodus event was the preeminent display of God’s redemption (1 Chron. 17:21) until the true Passover³ was accomplished by Jesus (1 Cor. 5:7).

THE DECALOGUE AS A COVENANT. Deuteronomy 5:1–5 introduces the Decalogue as a covenant. A covenant establishes a new relationship based on stipulated terms. A marriage covenant, for example, makes two unrelated individuals into a family. And marriage vows stipulate the terms of that new relationship. Similarly, the Ten Commandments describe a new relationship that God establishes with the people of Israel (2 Sam. 7:23–24).

GOD’S PERSONAL NAME. The personal name of God, Yahweh (rendered “LORD”), is used only to denote God’s relationship with his own people. God relates to all peoples of the world as “God” (Heb. *elohim*) and “Creator.” The name “Yahweh” (related to the Hebrew for “I am [present]”) expresses the special promise of God’s gracious presence with his own people (Ex. 3:13–15; Psalm 113). The Decalogue is addressed to God’s people (not to the nations) and comes from “Yahweh *your* God.” The phrase “Yahweh your God” appears five times in the Exodus Decalogue and nine times in the Deuteronomy version. The commandments include guidance for worship and promises of blessings that are intended uniquely for the redeemed. In the Ten Commandments, the holy God pronounces his personal name upon those whom he has adopted (Num. 6:27).

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JESUS KEPT THE FIRST COMMANDMENT. Before Jesus began his public ministry the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness, where the devil tempted him (Luke 4:1–2). Satan offered Jesus great authority and glory if Jesus would worship him. Jesus’ response was in keeping with the first commandment: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve” (Luke 4:8; quoting Deut. 6:13). Jesus kept the law perfectly, including his complete obedience to the first commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE EXODUS. Israel’s exodus from Egypt (Exodus 1–15), cited in the Decalogue’s preface, is the most frequently mentioned event in the Old Testament. The story is referenced around 120 times in the Old Testament. Its echoes resonate in the New Testament also. In particular, Jesus is identified as the final Passover lamb (John 19:14–15), Passover being the festival that commemorated Israel’s release from Egypt.

OTHER GODS. Israel faced frequent temptation to serve other gods alongside or instead of Yahweh. These included the gods of Mesopotamia (Gen. 31:19), the gods of Egypt familiar to the generations enslaved there (Ex. 12:12), the gods of Canaan encountered while settling the land (Ex. 34:13–16), and the gods of Babylon that the Jews were pressured to adopt during the exile (Dan. 8:3–12). In the New Testament also, Christians confronted more false gods as they planted churches throughout the Roman Empire (Act 14:11–14). The problem of distracting deities appears throughout the Bible—and throughout our societies today.

Theological Soundings

ELECTION. The covenant relationship announced in the Decalogue preface began at God’s initiative. The Hebrews may even have forgotten the God of their forefathers while in Egypt (Ex. 3:13). Regardless of the people’s neglect, “God knew [them]” (Ex. 2:25) and raised up a deliverer (Moses) to bring them out of bondage. Only after completing the people’s redemption from Egypt and gathering them to himself at Sinai did God give Israel his law. Beginning with the Decalogue, God taught the people how to walk in love and holiness in response to his gracious initiative to save them (Ex. 19:4–6).

IDOLATRY. Serving other gods is idolatry, regardless of whether physical idols are used to engage with those gods. There are actually no gods but the one true God (Deut. 4:35–39). However, in the ancient world the various powers of nature were typically given personality and called “gods.” Baal was the storm

god, who people thought made crops to grow. Asherah appears to have been a goddess of fertility who, people believed, made families increase. Whether one regards these powers as divine beings (with names like “Baal” and “Asherah”) or impersonal forces (with titles like “wealth” and “sex”), to serve them is to commit idolatry. God’s people must renounce idolatry and love only him with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:4-5). To do so one must ascribe all of life’s powers (such as wealth and sexuality) to the one true God and devote oneself to his righteous purposes for them.

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s preface and first commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:2–3; Deuteronomy 5:6–7

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first commandment. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Covenant** – A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship, a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. The OT is more properly understood as the old covenant, meaning the agreement established between God and his people prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant (NT).

² **Sanctification** – The process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. This process begins immediately after regeneration and continues throughout a Christian's life.

³ **Passover** – An annual Israelite festival commemorating God's final plague on the Egyptians, which led to the exodus. In this final plague, the Lord "passed over" the houses of those who had spread the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their homes (Exodus 12). Those who did not obey this command would suffer the death of their firstborn.