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# I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD

THE PROLOGUE TO THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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*Exodus 20:1-2*

## *One Main Thing*

God makes a public declaration to his people that he is the LORD. The LORD's dominion means both freedom from any suppressing powers of this earth and complete *compliance* to his moral structuring of the cosmos.

## *Introduction*

"Dear members of the city council...." That is how I began my 90-second speech, as I felt a small bead of sweat running down my temple and onto my cheek. I was nervous, excited, and feeling very indecisive on what words would be my next words. I was addressing the city council in my hometown for the first time concerning a matter that was dear to my heart, and

the six councilmen who were looking down on me with cold, hard—yet gentle—faces weren't helping calm the butterflies in my stomach. Neither were the one hundred fellow citizens of Florence helping either as they were patiently waiting for their turn to speak.

If you had the chance to address your home congregation, community, or city and make some kind of statement concerning who you are and what you expect of others, what would you say? While you might not desire this opportunity, you can imagine that it would be difficult to put your thoughts into words.

We see a similar situation in Exodus 20, a text that begins with a typical ancient Near Eastern formal announcement by a royal who is about to express his sovereignty and make clear his identity to Moses and the children of Israel. This passage is important and just might be the most important declaration by God within the five books of Moses.

The Ten Commandments are located in the center of a 40-chapter book, so that they form the fulcrum and centerpiece of the book of Exodus. Here we encounter the Jewish idea of completion (i.e., the number 10), yet we can tell that each command clearly represents a typical, archaic, and short statement referring to either God or God's requirement. Most telling are commandments 6, 7, and 8, which (in Hebrew, at least) each constitute only two words. These commandments—short, terse statements—are well-suited to being written on stone,

then duplicated and sent throughout the tribes of Israel. To introduce this text, Exodus 20:1-2 tells us that, “God spoke all these words” (emphasis added). The very God who spoke the earth into existence in Genesis speaks again. Just as God spoke and brought order to the natural world, so also now God speaks and brings order to the social and moral aspect of the universe—a perfect declaration by God. Following the royal declaration and announcement that the LORD’s divine presence is “in the house” in Exodus 20:1–2, what follows will truly be a profound introduction to the God who speaks and provides guidance to his people.

### *Going Deeper*

Several elements of this text help us understand our God. First, God speaks to Israel. Even when God is choosing to organize and define the moral order of the cosmos, he still makes the decision to involve humans in the process! At every stage, God is involving humanity in the unfolding of his designs.

A further detail worth mentioning has to do with the expression “ten commandments.” As we saw in the previous lesson, verses like Exodus 34:28 literally talk not about commandments but words or, perhaps even, ideas. Once we realize that these are ten ideas, words, matters, or concepts that the LORD presents to Israel, then we, as readers, begin to understand that these statements are as much about Israel perceiving the nature of God as they were about Israel grasping their responsibilities to God.

Last, and probably most important to understanding this passage, is the last line, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves.” This line, as noted, is a royal announcement about who will address the hearers. Within the framework of Exodus, this passage probably has a fitting partner in Exodus 3:3–16. In this previous chapter, God introduces himself to Moses at the burning bush as “I AM” and “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” Further, he tells Moses to go to “the land of Egypt” (also known in Exodus 20 as the “house of slaves”) and tell Pharaoh and all of Egypt that the LORD has come to deliver Israel. Clearly, by the time the narrative arrives at Exodus 20, God’s declaration of himself has expanded. In both cases, God identifies himself based on his relationship to humanity. The LORD is first a God who delivers a family. Then, he is a God of deliverance, a God who overthrows nations, a God who overtakes the oppressor, lifts up those who have been suppressed unjustly, and protects those who have no protector. This is the God who is going to give his commandments and define his way of life to Israel.

### *Application*

God has been speaking to humanity since the beginning of time. Are you listening? Too many people live their lives and only too late in life do they realize that the same God who gave shape and order to the cosmos

desires to give shape and order to our individual lives, our family, and our community. Are you listening for the voice of God?

Second, these commandments should cause us to not only ask, “What does God require of me?” but to also ask, “Who is this God?” These words draw us out of ourselves and encourage us to explore God and the nature of God—a daunting, yet exhilarating experience.

Third, when we begin to realize that we have come to the foot of Mt. Sinai to experience God, we just might comprehend that the first words by God tell us his name and that he comes in peace. God wants it to be clear that he has not come to Israel to bring harm or oppression, but—quite the contrary—to bring liberation. God is the God of freedom. While the new covenant that God has extended to us today may be altered from the one at Sinai, the nature of God’s offering of freedom has not. Knowing these three facets should offer you solace, peace, and comfort as you read the remainder of the commandments in Exodus 20.

### *Conclusion*

The story of Israel is amazing. This story tells us of a God who singled out a person and a people. This story gives us the liberation of the suppressed Israel to the domineering Egyptians. The overthrow of Egypt comes in the early chapters of Exodus, then the ten plagues, and finally the casting down of the oppressor into the

Red Sea. What an exciting story of people who can overcome in the face of such difficult odds. After these monumental and liberating events, the culmination of it all is the giving of the Ten Commandments and the announcement to Israel, that this God, the LORD, is the one who made it all possible. This is the God who is worthy to be listened to, and worthy to be served. It is no wonder that so many social movements across time and space have used such a powerful story to lift people up and give hope to the masses. In the same way that so many in the past have cried out for deliverance, maybe you also, in your moments of despair will have the hope and courage to hear the voice of the LORD God when he speaks to you and says, "I am the LORD your God who delivers you."

### *Discussion*

1. How does God initially deliver "these words," the Ten Commandments, to Israel? Is the form of delivery important?
2. What is the name of God in this passage? How does God identify himself?
3. In Exodus 20, God is now more than the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but now the God who "brought you out of the land of Egypt." What does this tell you about God's power and sovereignty?
4. If God had dominion even over the greatest of nations on the earth, namely Egypt, doesn't this imply that God can have dominion in your life, if you desire it?