

## **Exodus 20:1-4 (1984 NIV)** ***Worship the True God***

### **Introduction**

A renowned preacher by the name of Henry Beecher once pastored the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York.

One Sunday, he could not make it to the pulpit. So, he got his brother, Thomas Beecher, to substitute for him. When Thomas stood at the pulpit, some people got up and started to leave. They were disappointed because their favourite preacher was not preaching that day.

Sensing this, Thomas raised his hand and said, “Those who have come to worship Henry Beecher may leave. All who have come to worship God may stay.”

Yes, the ministry of gifted leaders and preachers is helpful and much appreciated, but only the true God is worthy of worship and devotion. Who or what do you and I worship today?

When someone or something within creation is elevated to function as a substitute for God, that someone or something becomes an idol. Those who fall into idolatry think they are worshipping the true God, but actually they have committed a sad mistake.

Idolatry is as old as the OT times. Three months after the exodus from Egypt, Moses was called up to Mt. Sinai by the Lord (19:1). There he received the 10 Commandments and was sent back to the people to tell them about these commandments.

- The 1<sup>st</sup> four have to do with Israel’s relationship with God.
- The next six have to do with Israel’s relationship with one another.
- But all the 10 Commandments are not 10 separate commands with no reference to one another.
- These 10 Commandments are in fact 10 sides of the one law of God, i.e. the law of love as summarized by Jesus in Matt. 22:38-40—“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

When Moses went down from Mt. Sinai to the people, Scripture affirms at the very outset in Ex. 20:1 that his words were no human concoctions. Rather, his words were the very words of God to and through him—“And God spoke all these words ...”

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In the prologue that follows in 20:2, God introduced Himself to Israel as “I am the Lord your God.” This is a rather weak translation in English. The word “Lord” (Yahweh) literally means “He that will be, He that is, He that was”. In other words, He is the eternal and self-existent God with no beginning and no end.

And the word “God” in v.2 literally means “He the supreme object of worship”. Hence, a more accurate and majestic rendition of 20:2 in English would be “I am He that will be, He that is, He that was; I am the supreme object of worship”. That was how God made Himself known.

Hence, if God is what He claims Himself to be, then the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment “you shall have no other gods before me” is a reasonable one.

### I. “You shall have no other gods before me” (20:3).

To understand why this is the first and foundational commandment, we need to appreciate a little of the historical setting then.

Polytheism was real and accepted by the people of ancient times. But God here demanded Israel to place single-minded allegiance to Him. He demanded His rightful place of pre-eminence among His people—“no other gods before me”; “no other gods against my face”.

People need a god, an object of worship. In this sense, we need to worship as we live, even if there is a false god at the centre of one’s life. When a person places his every activity, every energy, and every devotion to this one thing (false it may be), he already demonstrates that he lives his life in worship of that one thing.

Thus, the question is not whether a person worships a god, but whether he worships the true God or a false one. I believe everyone needs a god because the mystery of being human is that man (generic) has this innate need for someone/something to arrange his programme, to give him commands, and to demand his obedience.

- This someone/something is his object of worship.
- If the object is not the true God, then it is someone/something else.
- That someone/something else can even be the person himself—i.e. he is his own god.

We are reminded that only the true God (Yahweh) is worthy of our worship. He is the Creator God who is in control. He reminded Israel then (and us today) through Moses in 20:2 of who He was, who He is, and who He will be. Through Moses, God reminded His people that He was the one “who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”. He was the Creator of a new beginning for Israel.

- He sent Moses.
- He sent the plagues.
- He sent the sea waters parting.
- He sent the Egyptian army screaming in panic as He drowned them.
- He sent a cloud and a fire to direct Israel.
- He sent manna, quails and water to provide for Israel.

He had the power to create, to deliver and to sustain Israel. He reminded Israel then (and us today) not to waste time worshipping another god. Not wasting time on another god implies investing time with the one, true God. How?

1. Prayer: The 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment is the foundational way of relating to God in love. In turn, love sustains communication. In our own communication of love with God, we share with Him our plans, our hopes, our thoughts, our disappointments, etc. Prayer is one way we affirm that there is no other god but the one, true God Himself. When we are embarrassed to tell the one, true God our plans, hopes, thoughts and disappointments, it may be a warning sign that we are shifting our centre from the true God to someone/something else. That's why we are embarrassed; that's why we neglect the discipline of prayer which is our communication of love with the true God. But when we seek God in prayer, He does impart insights, certainties, and convictions to us.

The story is told of a man who was flying a plane in the early days. After taking off for two hours, he suddenly heard a noise in the plane. He recognized it as the noise of a rat biting on something. He became both concerned and anxious because the rat could be biting on some important control or cable. Then he remembered that rats could only live on the ground and under the ground; they could not survive in high altitudes. So, the man began to climb his plane—he went up 1,000 feet, then another 1,000 feet, and another until he was more than 20,000 feet up. The biting noise stopped. And when the pilot finally landed his plane, he found the rat dead.

Our worries, uncertainties, and anxieties are like rats—they cannot survive when we rise up high to God in prayer. We worship the true God when we raise our worries, uncertainties, and anxieties high up to God in prayer, and see Him bringing forth insights, certainties, and convictions to us. We are to make essential and major decisions come out of prayer. Prayer is one way we affirm that there are no other gods, but only the one, true God in our lives. In prayer we learn to worship the one, true God not by insisting “my fame, my want, my wish”, but by pleading to God “your name, your Kingdom, your will”.

2. Obedience: If the true God is our object of worship, we then are to please Him; to discover His will for us and obey it with devotion.

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- If you can serve Him best in the business world, then that's where you shall strive.
- If you can serve Him best in the home, then that's where you shall stay.
- If you can serve Him best in academia, then that's where you shall engage.
- If you can serve Him best in full-time ministry, then that's where you shall press on.

The “remain/abide in the Lord” principle implies that wherever you are that God has called you, that's where God wants you to be. Do your best for the Lord's glory at where He has placed you. Let not the thinking that the “grass is greener on the other side” entices you to be too quick to change. This does not mean one cannot change vocation or location, but it is a caution against being too quick to change as a knee-jerk reaction to some difficulties at where you presently are.

Perhaps the Lord is not calling you and me to change our situation, but wanting us to change our perspective of our situation. Indeed, to “remain/abide in the Lord” calls for obedience to be patient to wait on His time, and to be courageous to act in His time.

Let us have the openness to ask of the true God, “Lord, help me to do your bidding with faith and faithfulness so that I can obey you from season to season .”

If God is what He claims Himself to be, then the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment “you shall have no other gods before me” is a reasonable one. Who and what do you and I worship today?

God warned Israel then and He warns us today that there shall be no other gods before Him. But a greater danger for Israel then and us today is not the blatant worship of a false god. It is to worship the true God ... BUT in the wrong way. This is the breach of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment.

## II. “You shall not make for yourself an idol ...” (20:4).

Ex. 20:4 is given because of the invisibility and the incomparability of the true God Himself. It is directed against the tendency to materialize or localize the true God. Israel was told not to use images of anything in heaven, on earth, or under the sea to represent the one, true God. There should be a distinct separation between the Creator and the creation. You just cannot compare God with any physical or visual form made by man; God is simply incomparable.

Ex. 20:4 also implies the exercise of faith in an invisible but nevertheless active and effective God. Man's problem is that he tends to have certainty only when

he can see and touch. In Ex. 32, the people wanted Aaron to make them gods because Moses was slow in returning from Mt. Sinai.

- They couldn't see Moses.
- They wanted something visible and tangible to represent God.
- They built a golden calf.
- They depicted God as strong as a calf.
- They thought that they did God proud, but He was displeased.
- Their worship became corrupted and degenerated into an orgy.
- Their golden calf failed to represent the holiness of the true God.
- For Israel at that time, "seeing is believing".
- But the question is: "Is this the right kind of believing in God?"

An idol like the golden calf is as harmful to the spirituality of Israel then as it is to our own spirituality today. We face so many distractions and we need something to help us focus on God. Nothing quite wrong with that in itself, except that this something has the tendency to become some kind of a spiritual clutch—i.e. without it, we find it difficult to focus on God and to worship Him. Consequently, that very thing that functions to help us focus on God and to worship Him becomes more than just an aid/tool for us; it becomes a substitute for God. When we so cut down God to the size of such a substitute (i.e. an idol), whatever that may be, we limit God in accordance to our human terms. E.g. we may have a low view of the omnipresence of God because we restrict Him to our human understanding of time and space—i.e. we acknowledge His presence only when we can visualize or localize some man-made form. It is like someone saying, "I can only sense God's presence and worship Him when I am in church and not anywhere else."

Scripture forbids us to worship God in the form of an idol. Instead, Scripture teaches us to worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). This calls for the involvement of both head and heart. Head without heart is pure intellectualism; heart without head is pure emotionalism.

The danger of intellectualism is that God can become a subject of investigation in a book, not the object of our adoration in revelation.

Emotionalism has to do with the overemphasized need to experience God with the emotions. Yes, the Christian life is not empty of experiences and emotions—e.g. when we experience God's faithfulness in our lives, we can't help but to feel joyful and glad. However, when we overemphasized the need to relate with God through experiences and emotions, we may mistake emotionalism as spiritual affection. We then make these an idol/clutch in our worship of God. Even more dangerous is that we may worship these rather than the true God Himself.

Hence, it is no surprise that emotionalism (the excessive dependence on emotions to relate with God) has often done great damage to what may be truly spiritual.

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In 2 Cor. 12:1-6, Paul shares of someone being caught up to the third heaven. I believe he is here speaking of his own heavenly experience. But he did not urge his readers to seek the same experience. When we make heavenly experiences such as that of Paul normative for everyone without proper scriptural support, we can end up elevating some people and belittling others. For example:

- Serving refreshments is viewed as less spiritual than other more “spectacular” ministries.
- Perseverance of a man suffering from cancer is viewed as less spiritual than another who has been healed of the same sickness.
- Self-control is viewed as less spiritual than self-abandonment as a mark of the freedom we have in the Holy Spirit.

When emotionalism is highly elevated, God is seemed to be not very concerned about the realm of ordinary, everyday events. It is as if He is only interested in encountering people on the plane of spectacular and highly emotional experiences. As some cautionary words to this, we need to be reminded that:

- One, spectacular or emotional manifestations at worship events are not uniquely Christian because we do see them in other religious settings too. Hence, these experiences by themselves are inconclusive either for or against the Christian faith.
- Two, self-control is a very much exhorted aspect of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Thus, “let go and let loose” seems a rather dangerous advice to heed. In fact, God is a God of order—orderliness is a mark of His presence and working (1 Cor. 14:40). Conversely, disorderliness and confusion are rather questionable indications.
- Three, Satan is deceptive as he can take what is good and exaggerate it until it becomes bad and excessive.
- Four, repentance and conversion are the results of the convicting of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word. Scripture must not be put aside in favour of only just emotional experiences. Rom. 10:14 poses the question, “... how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” Indeed, belief comes from hearing the message of the Gospel in the Word.
- Five, revival is not about feeling good, but being transformed into Christlikeness as reflected through the fruit of the Holy Spirit in daily living—i.e. how you live daily in the world, not just how you behave on Sunday in church. Indeed, people who have encountered the Lord in a powerful way can feel not good but lousy about themselves—e.g. Isaiah saw the holiness of God and confessed, “Woe is me a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5); Peter experienced the power of the Lord in the miraculous catch of fish and confessed, “Go away from me for I am a sinner” (Luke 5:8).

## **Conclusion**

When we have idols in our lives and use them to help us worship God, we can end up worshipping them instead. Thus, we are cautioned to be aware of the excessive appeal to power experiences, or to man-made forms that are supposed to help us in worship lest our worship turns into idolatry.

There is only one, true God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. Only this one, true God is worthy of worship. We are to cultivate that love relationship with Him in daily prayer and obedience.

Who is your God and my God today? To whom is your life and my life devoted in worship today?