

## **Don't Forget God: Keep the First Commandment in the First Place**

**Tim Cosby, Associate Teaching Pastor  
Bella Vista Church, Rockford, Michigan**

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

*"You shall have no other gods before me." Ex. 20:2-3*

*"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " '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.*

*Matt. 22:36-38*

**What does 'keeping God first,' mean?** It means he is the center of loyalty, our ultimate concern. The question is not 'if' we have an ultimate concern, but 'who' is our ultimate concern? Everyone has an ultimate purpose in life. If you don't think so, look at your bank statement or your checkbook register. God thought that in view of all he had done for Israel, He should be their ultimate concern. John Calvin says that "the picture in view here is that of a wife who brings in a lover right before her husband's eyes." This is in essence what Israel did to God when she worshipped idols. Whatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in or depended on, anything desired more than God, is "another god." Desire is king. The question is, "Who will we desire?"

### **Who is this God and who will keep His commands?**

There are several fundamental questions underlying the book of Exodus: "Who is this God (Yahweh) and why should we obey his commands?" "Who on earth will follow the commands of this God?" As the story unfolds, the reader discovers the answers to these questions.

### **What are some of the major characteristics of Yahweh?**

- 1. He is invisible, but he has a name: Yahweh.** It is with this name that he initiates a relationship with people. This God, though invisible, chooses to initiate relationships, to introduce himself; and as it turns out, He already has a history with his people. Though he is eternal, he is a God of space and time. (Read Deut. 4:32-39) Why is this relationship important? Because he knows people will ask, "Why should I believe in your God?" People are more likely to believe someone if they have a prior relationship of trust and provision with that person. And this was the case with Israel and Yahweh.
- 2. He commands.** Commands always follow relationship. God established a long relationship with the people of Israel before he gave them the Ten Commandments. At least 430 years!
- 3. He speaks things into existence.** This is one of the things that sets him apart from all the other gods of the nations. He speaks things into existence (note the creation story in Gen. 1-2).

**So, is the first commandment unreasonable?** Is it unreasonable for God, who had already established a track record with Israel, delivered them from Egyptian bondage and provided for their every need in the wilderness, to ask Israel to make him their center of loyalty? Is this God asking for 'blind faith?' No. He speaks and stuff happens; he acts on behalf of his people; he delivers them, he feeds them, clothes them, protects them, gives them water to drink, etc. After all he's done for them, he has a right to make some commands.

### **Will the Pharaoh obey Yahweh's commands?**

**God gave a command to the Pharaoh: "Let my people go."** *Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."* Pharaoh evidently did not believe he needed to obey Yahweh's command. At least, at first. A single, invisible God was nonsense to the Egyptians. They worshipped many visible gods: Horus the hawk, Thot the ibis, Khunm the ram, Apis the sacred bull. What good was a god you could not see? God gave ten commands to Pharaoh before he gave them to Israel. (Actually, he gave one command ten times.) We might reword God's response as "How many times do I have to tell you?" Beginning in Ex. 7, one by one the Egyptian gods fell. The river god turned to blood, the sacred fly became a swarming pest, the sun-god Ra disappeared behind a cloud, Apis, the great bull failed to protect his livestock. Finally, the Pharaoh, and every Egyptian family each lost their firstborn son. Pharaoh

was the last 'god' for Yahweh to defeat publicly. Yahweh, the invisible God, triumphed in a very visible and decisive fashion

### **Will Moses and the Israelites obey God?**

Before God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, he had demonstrated the power and authority of His name to them. When the Hebrews ran out of water, God provided. When food supplies failed, God provided. When raiders attacked, God routed the enemy. And finally, God freed them. He alone deserved the credit. No one in Israel could say, "Look what we did to make God let us go." "Look how we helped to pull off the great escape!" "Look how we helped to defeat the most powerful army in the world!" "Look at our ingenuity in figuring out how to cross the Sea of Reeds!"

The question for Israel and for us is, "Could we ever forget a God like this?" A God who had already done so many wonders on our behalf? If we jump ahead 40 years as Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, Moses answers the question for us. They had forgotten God, and so do we. (Read Dt. 8:10-20). Nothing grieves God's heart more than our simple act of forgetting Him. On the first day in the land God had promised them, they ate produce from the land and the manna stopped. They built their own cities, fought their own wars and appointed a king. They prospered and grew plump. They began to trust in their chariots and horses instead of their God. They would discriminate against the poor and the aliens, forgetting that they were once both. In a word, they would forget God. **Success, not failure** is the greatest danger facing any follower of God. Every significant downfall in Israel's existence came when she seized power for herself. Her greatest victories came when she rested, trusted and called on him. This historical truth is recorded in order that we might learn from Israel's mistakes.

God wants to have the central place in our lives. He wants to be our ultimate concern. This fact is stated clearly by Jesus himself in Matt. 22: 36-38:

*"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " '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."*

**A good question for us today is, "Will we remember God or forget God?"** If we forget God, it is certain that we will replace him with another 'ultimate concern.' Worshiping other gods is always obvious to God. Whatever we undertake comes into his sight. Worshiping a strange god is an act that takes place blatantly before God's own face and majesty, like a wife bringing a lover before her husband in broad daylight. The question is not, "Will we have an ultimate concern, but who will be our ultimate concern?"

The Exodus of Israel out of Egypt was not primarily about liberation or freedom, though both were realities. It was primarily about the exchange of masters; the exchange of the false for the true. As Bob Dylan sang, "You gotta serve somebody." Will we keep the first commandment in the first place (out of love and gratitude for all He has done), or will we choose to live life by our own set of rules and forget God? Or, worse yet, will we try to perform perfectly for God out of duty and fear?

The first commandment is God's spousal entreaty: "Please don't forget Me." And as Jesus restated this command in the New Testament, He would reframe the question and ask us, "Who do you say that I am?" "Will you follow Me?" "Will you worship Me?"