



International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series
L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.

Exodus 20:18-26 New American Standard Bible October 15, 2017

The [**International Bible Lesson**](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, October 15, 2017**, is from **Exodus 20:18-26**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [*International Bible Lessons Commentary*](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [*International Bible Lesson Forum*](#).

(Exodus 20:18) All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.

The first time the Israelites experienced terrifying thunder and lightning, they were slaves in Egypt and the thunder and lightning were part of a plague that God sent upon the Egyptians through Moses: “When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt; hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth. It was the worst storm in all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation. Throughout Egypt hail struck everything in the fields—both people and animals; it beat down everything growing in the fields and stripped every tree. The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were” (Exodus 9:23-26). They knew the potential destructive power of God when they heard and saw thunder and lightning on the mountain, so they were terrified and stayed at a distance (as Moses had warned them to do) when God descended to talk to Moses and Aaron. [Remember last week’s lesson on Exodus 19:16-25.] The Bible teaches: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise” (Psalm 111:10). To begin teaching the Israelites about Himself, the LORD began with teaching them to fear God. God began demonstrating His nature and character to both Egyptians and Israelites when they were in Egypt, leading some to fear and believe in God and others to scoff: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools

despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). From their experiences in Egypt and at Mount Sinai, the LORD began teaching them more about His character and His plans to make them His holy people and priests to the nations.

(Exodus 20:19) Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”

God began teaching the Israelites according to the truth: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Eventually, some would fear the LORD, learn more about God, and accept the truth that the LORD loved them: “Let those who fear the LORD say: ‘His love endures forever’” (Psalm 118:4). “Fear” is sometimes translated “reverence,” but in the beginning of their relationship with the LORD, God knew the depth of their ignorance and their weak moral character; therefore, to help them obey Him the LORD applied this truth: “through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided” (Proverbs 16:6). Because they were terrified of the LORD, the Israelites wanted Moses to stand between God and themselves. From the beginning of their journey to freedom, Moses had been their leader and intercessor. Now, at their request, Moses would also be their instructor and mediator. Moses would tell them the truth about God and teach them God’s laws without the LORD speaking directly to them. They said they would trust Moses’ words as the words of God. When they had needs for food, water, or forgiveness for their sins, Moses would pray to the LORD and the LORD would hear and answer his prayers. The people promised Moses they would listen to (obey) the words of God that Moses spoke to them. When Jesus, the Son of God, came, He truly revealed the nature, truth, and character of God directly in His words and deeds: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Similar to Moses, Jesus prayed for the people and met all of their needs, including their needs for food and forgiveness. Similar to Moses’ experience, many of the leaders and people were fools who despised Jesus’ wisdom and instruction (see (Proverbs 1:7). Even today, as the beginning of wisdom, fear sometimes motivates people to turn to Jesus and His words for help and salvation.

(Exodus 20:20) Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”

Moses did not want the people to be afraid that God had come down on the mountain to punish them with lightning, thunder, and hail as the LORD had punished the Egyptians for their sins. But, to keep them from sinning, they did need the fear of God and the knowledge that God was almighty, just, and holy. Ideally, love for the LORD will keep us from sinning. But before we come to love God, the fear of the LORD will sometimes help us avoid sin when we are tempted. After the LORD told them not to, the test the people

had to face was whether or not they would obey Him or come forward to touch or climb the mountain. They passed the test in large part because, with good reason, they feared the LORD. Through Moses and their experiences with God, God was just beginning to teach them about His power, wisdom, justice, holiness, and steadfast, unfailing, lovingkindness. From the New Testament we learn that “God is love” (1 John 4:8); “God is light” (1 John 1:5); and “God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29).

(Exodus 20:21) So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

The Israelites obeyed the LORD and remained at a distance from the mountain. Moses also obeyed the LORD and he went up the mountain where God was. Fear of the LORD might have motivated all of them at that time, but Moses’ fear (reverence) of the LORD did not move him to be afraid of the LORD. Because he knew more than the people about the true nature and character of the LORD, Moses knew he could trust every word the LORD spoke.

(Exodus 20:22) Then the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven.

The Israelites learned, and all those who read and study the Bible now, need to remember that the LORD spoke to Moses from heaven. In the Bible, God has spoken truly to reveal the truth about Himself and the His plans for the world through His faithful followers. In Jesus, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

(Exodus 20:23) ‘You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves.

The LORD commanded them not to make and worship idols. Later, Paul warned: “The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons” (1 Corinthians 10:20). In the Book of Revelation, we learn that demon worship and idol worship go together, and those who refuse to worship the LORD exclusively will in some way begin worshiping idols: “The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk” (Revelation 9:20}.

(Exodus 20:24) ‘You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.

Since they were not permitted to make idols, the LORD told them how they could worship and honor Him apart from sacrifices to graven images. Throughout the Book of Genesis, God's people worshiped the LORD, built altars, and offered sacrifices to the LORD. Before laws about tabernacle worship and Levitical priests were given, and perhaps even after these ceremonial laws were given by Moses, the Israelites worshiped the LORD with sacrifices. After the Israelites entered the Promised Land and received their tribal land possessions, they were to follow these laws if they offered a sacrifice honoring the LORD; if they did so, the LORD promised to come to them and bless them. Some of the Judges offered sacrifices to the LORD. By the time of Samuel and the anointing of kings, Samuel was permitted to offer sacrifices [see 1 Samuel 7:9]. However, King Saul was not permitted to do so [see 1 Samuel 13:8-13].

(Exodus 20:25) ‘If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it.

If they put a tool to a stone, to smooth it, they might be tempted to engrave an image on the stone as part of their altar; therefore, probably to prevent them from being tempted to make a graven image of any kind as part of their worship, it was better to tell them to use stones untouched by a tool. The reason to avoid using a tool might also involve human pride: the pride that can come from the worshiper thinking they can make a more beautiful stone than the LORD has made in nature. It would defile the altar and worship if human pride became involved rather than humble worship before the LORD.

(Exodus 20:26) ‘And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.”

Demon and idol worship included (and includes) many immoral activities, including exposing your private parts. The worship of the LORD was to be in the beauty of holiness: “Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 29:2). No part of worship should detract from true worship, from holiness, from focus on the LORD, especially anything that might tempt someone to think immoral thoughts. Later, in tabernacle worship, the Levite priests would go up steps, but they were also commanded to wear appropriate undergarments. Jesus said, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. When the people saw the effects on the mountain, what did they do?
 2. What is a benefit of fear of God?
 3. What did the people think would happen to them if God spoke to them?
 4. Who did the people tell Moses they wanted to speak to them?
 5. What did the people see for themselves?
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Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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