

Small Group Discussion Guide

Exodus 20:22-26

“From an Altar to the Cross”

Based on Sunday's
Sermon 10/18/26

Background

The laws of Exodus 20:22–23:33 are called the Book of the Covenant. They are different and distinct from the Decalogue. For example, Exodus 24:7 tells us that these statutes were written on parchment and not inscribed in stone. In addition, they were written down by the hand of Moses and not by the hand of the Deity (24:4).¹ The first two commandments are restated in this section, and then very specific details are drawn from them for the people of Israel.²

Verse 23 is a reiteration of the first two commandments (20:3–6). It goes without saying that this reiteration indicates their importance for understanding what follows, not only through 20:26 but to the end of the Book of the Covenant. Both the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant begin the same way, with a declaration that Yahweh and Yahweh alone is worthy of Israel's worship and is therefore to be obeyed.³

The Ten Commandments begin with prohibitions against polytheism and idolatry. There is only one God; no others are to be worshipped, and no images are to be made of him or of other gods. The Book of the Covenant also opens with these commandments and an expounding of them. This point underscores monotheism and Israel's fidelity to God as central tenets of the law at Sinai. They begin each section of law because they are the core teachings upon which all Hebrew religion, belief and law are based. ‘Hear, O Israel! Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one! And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deut. 6:4–5).

The truth of this teaching is no less important for the church today than it was for Israel in the wilderness. When a certain lawyer came to Jesus, he asked him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:36–37).⁴

Discussion Questions

Getting Started

1. Describe a time of worship at church, at a concert or conference that stood out as especially meaningful. What made it so special?

¹ John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 19–40*, vol. 2, EP Study Commentary (Darlington, England; Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 56.

² Currid, 58.

³ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 441.

⁴ Currid, 62.

Observation

2. What does God remind Israel of in v. 22 before giving the altar instructions, and why might that reminder matter?
3. What reason does God give for prohibiting the making of altars from silver or gold, or carved stone?
4. What verbs (actions) describe what Israel is to do, and what verbs describe what God will do?
5. What is the stated reason for prohibiting steps to the altar?

Interpretation

6. This passage further explains God command to not make idols for worship. How can craftsmanship of silver and gold, of carved stone, become self-exalting or idolatrous?
7. Compare Exodus 20:22-26 to Matthew 22:37-38. Putting them together, what do we take away concerning worship?
8. How does the simplicity and humility required in Exodus 20:22–26 help us appreciate the bold, purified access described in Hebrews 10:11–22, and how should that shape the way we draw near to God today?

Application

9. How can the church today guard against worship that becomes more about performance than loving God and praising Him for our salvation in Jesus Christ?
10. What would it look like for your personal worship to be more “earthen”—simple, sincere, and Christ-centered?

Prayer List: