

DEVOTIONAL 2



GOD IN OUR MIDST

EXODUS 20:22-26; 23:10-19

^{20:22} And the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel:

‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.’²³

You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and 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.²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it.²⁶ And you shall

not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.’

^{23:10} “For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield,¹¹ but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

¹² “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.

¹³ “Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.

¹⁴ “Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me.¹⁵ You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed.¹⁶ You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.¹⁷ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God.

¹⁸ “You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

¹⁹ “The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.

DAY 1

EXODUS 20:22–24

²² And the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.’ ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and 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.’ ”

Somewhere in my teen years, Huey Lewis and the News were singing about the Power of Love. Love indeed has a power. However, it is not always exactly as we think of it. Much of what Huey Lewis sings about is an external force that acts upon us, making us do either valiant or silly things. Thomas Cranmer, an English theologian, puts it a little differently. In his piece *Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love*, he says: “The inner attitudes of the human heart determined the will’s direction which then had power over the other faculty of reasoning as well. . . . The passions of the heart ultimately determined human conduct, an affection could only be ‘overcome by a more vehement affection.’ ” According to Cranmer’s thinking, what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. The mind doesn’t direct the will. The mind is actually captive to what the will wants, and the will itself, in turn, is captive to what the heart wants. It is this affection that God seeks to leverage in his relationship with his people.

Here at the opening of what is called the Book of the Covenant (cf. Ex. 24:7), we see God reminding his people of their relationship of love. God speaks to his people, comes to his people, and blesses his people. It is this relationship that is highlighted as God asks for a love in return, or in Cranmer’s words, a “vehement affection.” What follows, then, throughout the Book of the Covenant is not an antiseptic set of rules but rather a path that our wills and our minds can walk, following our hearts in expressing our love for God.

But just as polyamorous human love cannot thrive, so too we will not thrive in our relationship with God if we allow other lovers in. That is why God says “you shall have no other gods” (20:3)—not silver gods, not gold gods. I alone am to be worshipped. When we recognize the love nature of this relationship, this makes sense. God is not a tyrannical despot coming up with arbitrary rules. Rather, he is seeking a people to love. He is seeking a people who will love him back.

PRAYER

YHWH, thank you for setting your affection on us. We know that we don't deserve it. We know we could never do enough to earn it. And yet you have pursued us, sealing us as your bride through the finished work of Christ. Enlarge the love of our hearts. May we be captured again by your beauty. May we recognize your advances. May we rest in your blessing. May we have eyes only for you. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our great bridegroom. Amen.

DAY 2

EXODUS 20:25-26

²⁵ “If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.”

Pulsing lights, pounding drums, and a lone singer belting out a tune. The audience sways with the beat, clearly moved, hands raised in appreciation. Worship? What I am describing could be a concert just as easily as it could describe current, popular worship services. My point is not to pick on any particular worship style, but rather to underline how easy it is for worship to begin to look like the culture surrounding it.

While the first part of our passage for this week emphasizes who is to be worshipped, namely YHWH, the second part deals with how YHWH is to be worshipped. This is the same format as found in the Ten Commandments, which start “You shall have no other gods before me” and continue with “You shall not make for yourself a carved image. . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (vv. 3-5). How we worship is as important as who we worship.

In verse 25, the prohibitions for hewn stone seem a little culturally distanced, but we much more easily recognize the prohibitions to personally mount the altar and expose oneself as combatting the ritual sexuality of the day. This is why the folks that put together the Westminster Confession of Faith said: “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture” (WCF 21.1). Or, to put it positively, they emphasized: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the Sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God” (WCF 21.5).

God knew then and he knows now that we will always battle the tendency to shape our worship to look like the culture. Thanks be to him that Jesus Christ ascended to the cross and exposed himself so that we don’t have to.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to worship you properly. It is so easy to worship the works of our own hands or to celebrate ourselves. May we stay focused on you and on your finished work. Thank you for giving us your Word as our guide and the avenue of prayer, which are central to our meeting with and worshipping you. May you be all our vision today. In Jesus’ name alone, we pray. Amen.

DAY 3

EXODUS 23:10-12

¹⁰ “For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, ¹¹ but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

¹² “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.”

What many of us remember when we hear the word sabbath is what we couldn't do on Sundays. We've heard all the stories about people at cottages covering their boats on Saturday night so that everyone knew they didn't take them out on the water on Sunday. My family couldn't read the newspaper before church, but we could afterwards. We learn here in Exodus 23 that there is so much more to sabbath than a list of what one should not do. The Pharisees got hung up on expanding that list of don'ts as well. These verses point far more to a list of what we should do to fulfill sabbath teaching, which is, of course, what Jesus consistently was pointing out to the religious leaders of his day.

This passage even points us in that different kind of direction. It teaches us that the ideas of sabbath and justice go together. How many of us ever heard that idea growing up? But here it is in the text. Sabbath creates space for generosity. Sabbath ideas recognize the real existence of poverty and the need to help the poor. People aren't just poor because they don't work hard enough. Poverty results from all kinds of circumstances, including drought in agricultural areas, natural disasters that destroy infrastructure, unprincipled landowners who exploit tenant farmers and workers. All peoples are to be the beneficiaries of God's creation and order. Even slaves were to benefit from the sabbath. Sabbath helps us to understand and put into practice actions consistent with that teaching.

Sabbath practice should interact properly with the realities of nature. We are to be stewards of the earth, recognizing the limitations of the way God made the earth and the people in it. Sabbath is living out what is often called the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:27-8. We are all to care for the earth and the people in it. Sabbath practices are a reminder to think of the world beyond our own private concerns. Sabbath even creates a reserve of energy and resources to tackle the tough situations from a bigger picture.

Similarly, sabbath and kingdom ideas go together. God's reign is all about seeing the world and all the people in it as his. He cares about every square inch of the world, as theologian Abraham Kuyper says, and about every moment of our lives. The rhythms of sabbath are good because they make clear that rest and work together make for proper kingdom living. Surely understanding and living the sabbath way is a major part of the mature Christian's life and covenant living.

PRAYER

Lord, help us to see sabbath ideas for what they are, namely, provisions for life that you put in place so that we can live life to the fullest. You want us to work and rest because you love us and know what is best for us. May we use our sabbath pauses to see the world and our lives more from your perspective.

DAY 4

EXODUS 23:14-17

¹⁴ “Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. ¹⁵ You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶ You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. ¹⁷ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD.”

Life’s rhythms are so welcome. We recognize this if we ever get thrown off rhythm, even if it is for something good, like vacation. As we come to the end of the Book of the Covenant, YHWH reminds his people of the rhythms that he has built into the world and the comprehensive way they are connected to worship. The three annual feasts—corresponding to the different stages in Israel’s agricultural year—remind the people that they are to be a worshipping community the year round. From the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Feast of Harvest to the Feast of Ingathering, the people are to remember that their very lives are tied to YHWH. Specifically, they are to remember YHWH as their Creator as they celebrate his ascendancy over the produce of the field. And they are to remember YHWH as Redeemer as they remember the events of their deliverance from Egypt.

We too live by rhythms. We have the daily rhythm of work and rest. The weekly rhythm of setting apart one day in seven to be dedicated to worship. And the year-long rhythms of remembering Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. Like Israel, these rhythms give shape to who we are and they keep us connected to the God who formed us. Part of the question for us today is whether we appreciate these rhythms? It can be easy to blow by them (daily, weekly), or pay them little mind, but at what cost? God knows how difficult it is for us to rest, so he commands it. To take it one step further, when Jesus finished the work of redemption, he sat down at the right hand of the Father. He inaugurated a new creation and invites us to the Sabbath rest he has prepared for all who will believe.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for the gift of rhythms. Thank you for establishing them and for calling us to pay heed to them. Help us today to embrace rest from our physical labors and our social interactions, and to ultimately rest in you. Thank you, Jesus, that you have finished the work of redemption that we could never complete, even if we were to work nonstop. May our rest be testimony to the world of our faith in you. We pray all this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

DAY 5

EXODUS 23:19

“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.”

Somewhere in my formative years, a speaker conducted a thought experiment with a group of us. They were speaking about generosity and commending our willingness to take the clothes that were too small or that we didn't care for anymore and donate them to good causes. But then the speaker asked us to imagine inviting a needy person into our home and then encouraging them to take whatever they wanted from our closets. Would we be as generous when their hand fell on our favorite shirt or our most expensive pants?

While there is an element of artificiality to this thought experiment, it does drive at how easy it is to donate leftovers or unusable items, as opposed to the best, the firstfruits. It is this first and best that God has asked from us. The significance for Israel was hard to miss. When the land would yield its produce, they were to take the first (which implied the faith of waiting to get one's own) and they were to take the best (which implied humility to recognize one who was higher than any individual). These were to be presented before the Lord as signs of complete dependence and complete adoration.

While we don't live in an agricultural society, the principles of dependence and worship still hold. When we take the first part of our paycheck and offer it to the Lord's work, we acknowledge our faith that the rest of God's provision will be enough; we acknowledge our love for the Lord and a willingness to put him before us. When we give the first day of our week to him in worship, we acknowledge that he is enough and can fill us in ways that work or exhausting entertainment cannot. When we offer our children to him, we put their spiritual well-being in his strong hands. Dependence and worship—the best of the firstfruits.

PRAYER

Father, open our eyes to the ways that we can honor you with the firstfruits of our lives. Help us to grow in our trust for you and in our worship of you. Thank you that you have given Jesus Christ as the best of the firstfruits of heaven in order that we might be brought near to you. Open the eyes of our hearts, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.