

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 20:18-26
“Idols and Altars”

Prepared by Charles H. Jensen, Pastor, Cornerstone Fellowship
101 Kylies Road, Coatesville, PA 19329
610-384-1375
charleshjensen@aol.com

Exodus 20:18-26

Verse 18-19

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

- When the law was given, God came to the mountain with the unusual displays of his presence and his power. The people are afraid because of these manifestations and so respected God’s direction not to come up on the mountain while he was present there. See Exodus 19:12-13, 15-19, and 20-25.
- These manifestations of God’s presence were so powerful that the people requested a mediator to stand between them and God. They feared the consequences of hearing from God directly. Through history God has honor this request through Moses, the priesthood, and Jesus Christ. Jesus is the last High Priest, the final mediator between God and humanity.

Verse 20-21

Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

- Moses explained that the awful signs that accompanied God’s presence on the mountain were for the sake of the people. They were designed to show the people who God was so that they would understand why they should obey him. The signs were designed to fill the people with awe for YHWH.
- That the people kept the instructions God had given about coming up on the mountain illustrates that they understood who God was and that

he must be obeyed. They did not violate his command because they recognized his power.

- Moses knew that the people need not fear the presence of the Lord as long as they understood the obligation placed upon them by his favor in choosing them to be his people; the obligation to listen to his word and to do what he said.

Verse 22-23

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

- Given the manifestations of God’s presence, it is obvious that God spoke to the people. None of them can argue to the contrary. The manifestations prove the presence of God.
- God repeats the first two commandments. Israel is to have no other god but YHWH.

Verse 24-26

‘Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and your goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.

- Before the establishment of a regular place of worship, Israel was instructed to build temporary altars for the worship of YHWH. They were to be designed from earth or natural stone. They were not to have steps around them. They were to be for the honoring of what God had done in that particular place.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Idols and Altars*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)