

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles  
**Our Struggle with God:**  
**The Audacious Command of the Awesome God**  
Exodus 20:1-3

In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, Steven Van Zandt, guitarist in Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band said, *"I am a reformed Taoist, part-time Buddhist, Hindu, animist, pagan, Jewish mystic, and Christian. I always got along great with priests and rabbis and mullahs and gurus, even though I spend most of my life constructively criticizing them."*

And TV star Sarah Michelle Gellar, says this: *"I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it's my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I've been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I've taken bits from everything and customized it."*

Steven Van Zandt and Sarah Michelle Gellar don't worship God. They worship what we could call "Frankengod." Not the God who is, but a god invented from pieces of other gods. This god may have the head of Buddha, and the heart of Jesus, and the hands of Gandhi. But it is not the God of the Bible. It is not the God who gave us the Ten Commandments.

In the next ten weeks we will be having ten sermons, one on each of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20. This goes along well with our through-the-Bible Scripture reading program since, as of today we are reading this passage. By the way, if you haven't started reading the Word along with the rest of us, it's not too late to join us. Purchase a Daily Bible today and start reading at January 28 and you'll be right up with the rest of us.

Turn with me to Exodus 20 and you will see how God introduces the First Commandment:

*"Then God spoke all these words, saying "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me."*

Before we take a look at the Audacious Command found in that last sentence, we should consider how God introduces it, and, in fact, lays the foundation for all the Ten Commandments. He introduces the commandments by introducing Himself, *The Awesome God* of Exodus 20:2.

## The Awesome God (Exodus 20:2)

### A. Who is He? God's Name

The first thing God does is gives us his name: *"I am the LORD your God."*  
In the Hebrew Scriptures there are three primary names used for God.

- **Adonai** is indicated in our English Bibles as "Lord." The fundamental idea of this word has to do with authority.
- **Elohim** is indicated in our English Bibles word translated as "God." The fundamental idea of this word has to do with power. There is a difference between Authority (indicated by Adonai) and Power (indicated by Elohim). But God has both.
- **Yahweh** is the third primary name for God in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is indicated in our English Bibles with GOD or LORD, having all the letters capitalized.<sup>1,2</sup>

Yahweh is God's **Personal Name**. Although the words *Elohim* and *Adonai* are accurate descriptions of the Supreme Being, the word *Yahweh* seems to be his personal name, reflecting more of his intrinsic identity. He introduces it in this way in a conversation he had with Moses:

Exodus 3:13-15, *"Then Moses said to God, Behold I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. Now they may say to me, What is His name? What shall I say to them? And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, I AM has sent me to you'...This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations."*

If Adonai indicates God's authority, and Elohim indicates God's power, *Yahweh* is associated with God's **involvement**. In Exodus 6, God uses this personal name as the basis of his promise to be involved with His people.

Exodus 6:3-8, *"I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty but by my name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them...I have heard the groanings of the sons of Israel...and I have remembered My covenant...I will deliver you from their bondage...I will also redeem you...I will take you for My people and I will be your God...I will bring you to the land...I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD."*

For someone to tell me of the various qualities they possess is no guarantee they will use those qualities to be involved in my life. "I am strong" does not necessarily mean they

will carry my suitcase. But *Yahweh* indicates more than just his attribute of “Strong One” or “Lord” with power and authority over us. *Yahweh* indicates His personal INVOLVEMENT with us with all he is: “I AM who I AM, and I will be to you what I AM.”

### Summary Chart about God’s Primary Names

Name	Translators’ Indication	Fundamental Idea	N.T. Equivalent
Adonai	Lord or lord	Authority	Kurios
Elohim	God	The Strong One	Theos
Yahweh	LORD or GOD	Personal Name	None

### B. What has He done? God’s Redemption

So the first basis upon which the Ten Commandments are built is upon the Who He is, God’s name—his identity. The God giving these commands is “the LORD, your God (*Yahweh*, your *Elohim*).”

The second basis is What He has done—God’s redemption. The text states, “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*”

I find this tremendously instructive. God could have used any of a number of reasons why we should heed and obey the commands that are to follow. He could have appealed to the fact that he is our Creator, or that He has all power, or that he hates impurity, or that He is pure so we should shape up. But no. Although all these are true statements about God, none of these characteristics are cited by him for us to heed the Ten Commandments. He draws attention to what He has already done for us in redemption: “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*”

What the land of Egypt was to the Hebrew, existence in the world before our salvation is to the Christian. What the “house of slavery” was to the Hebrew, the power and penalty and presence of sin to which we were enslaved is to the Christian. What the crossing of the Red Sea was for the Hebrew, the cross of Christ is for the Christian. In each case, the God of the Bible appeals to us to obey the Ten Commandments not because He is a God of Creation, power, or purity—all of which are true—but that He is the God of Redemption. He is lovingly on our side already. He has saved us. Now he is looking out for our best interest.

And so we come to the first Commandment. The Audacious Command: “*You shall have no other gods before (or besides) Me.*”

## **The Audacious Command (Exodus 20:3)**

### **A. A singular God challenging a pluralistic society**

The Israelites had been completely surrounded by a polytheistic culture for as long as any of them could remember. So when God demanded exclusive loyalty, it was a revolutionary idea.

All of Israel's neighbors were Pagans—they worshipped lots of different gods. People believed certain gods ruled specific geographic areas. There were “national gods”

- The Philistines had Dagon
- The Moabites' had Chemosh
- The Ammonites' had Molech.

And while a person or nation may have a “favorite” god, they certainly wouldn't think of narrowing their worship to just one. If the god or gods of another nation seemed to have power, then you could add that god to your collection.

Later in the history of the Hebrew people, we will see the Philistines trying to do this in 1 Samuel 5. After they capture the Ark of God from Israel, they took it to Ashdod and set it up in Dagon's temple beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off; only his torso remained. Eventually, the Philistines decided they would be better off if they sent the Ark back to Israel, but that little story illustrates this first commandment: “Worship no god but me.”

The idea of having only one God was perhaps a new thought to the Hebrew people who had been so influenced by living among the Egyptians for 430 years. The Egyptians served many gods. In fact, each of the plagues directed toward Pharaoh to “Let my people go” were not just a punishing inducement to release them from slavery. Each plague was also a direct assault to one of those gods. The Nile was worshipped as a god, so Jehovah turned it to blood. The sun was worshipped, so God darkened it. They even worshipped a frog god. God said, “You like frogs?”

But on the cusp of the birth of the nation of Israel, at the foundational base of the Ten Commandments, God makes it plain. He alone is God. He alone is to be the God of the lives of the Hebrews.

The same is true today in his call upon the lives of Christians. And today we live as Christians in a society not unlike the pluralistic paganism of ancient Egypt. No, our neighbors do not worship the sun god Ra or Philistine God Dagon, or the Ephesian

fertility goddess Diana. But whatever god they worship seems to be approved by our society.

Steven Van Zandt and Sarah Michelle Gellar have their opinions as we have noted. The trouble is that their “Frankengod” does not exist, except in their own imaginations. They are not alone in conceiving gods of their own imagination. People will say, “Well, I don’t believe in a god who would send someone to hell...” Or I don’t believe in a god who would say homosexual behavior is wrong. Or I don’t believe in this kind of a god or that kind of a god.

In America we believe in equality. But everyone’s view of God is not equal. In America everybody is equal in the eyes of the law. All citizens should be treated with respect and with equality when it comes to housing, employment, and treatment under the law. But everyone’s view of God is not equally true.

Van Zandt and Gellar, and countless people like them, have a problem. And the problem is the first commandment. *“You shall have no other gods before me.”*

Which is to say, the Lord is the only true God. Or, to put it in negative terms, “All religions do not lead to God using different paths.” There is only one God. His name is not Allah—or Zeus or Hermes or any other name that might be used. That one God demands to be worshipped exclusively.

Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”* I didn’t make it up.

This is the message we have preached and promoted and publicized as a church. It is what we have stood for decades. This week I received this January 22, 2007 letter addressed “To the Saints at Central Bible Church”

*This is a very long overdue thank you. In the late 60’s and early 70’s I attended a neighborhood Bible Club that you sponsored. Each week I earned points for attending, bringing my Bible and reading and memorizing Scripture. At the end of the year, since I had enough points you paid for me to get to go to Trout Creek Camp where I accepted the Lord as my Savior. I was a lost little girl in a less than wonderful home, but the Lord had me in His grip.*

*Now I’m a happily married mother of two. I help with the primary Sunday School class and teach a parenting class at Florence Church of the Nazarene.*

*Thank you for reaching out to a little girl you didn’t even know. It has had an eternal impact.*

*In Christ, Elisa Gray*

Some say it is arrogant to say Jesus is the only way. But arrogance is not saying, “I believe that God is who He said He is.” And I believe that if He says He is the only true God, then He really is the only true God.

Arrogance is saying, “God is whatever I say He is.”

Arrogance is not saying, “I believe Jesus when He said He was the only way to God.” Arrogance is saying, “I don’t like the idea of Jesus as the only way, so I’ve decided that ‘all roads lead to God.’” Arrogance is saying, “I’ve decided that as long as people are sincere in what they believe, they’ll go to heaven.” That’s saying, “I know more about God than Jesus ever did.” And that is arrogant.

The God who created the Universe with the power of His Word is the one who has the right to tell us who He is. All roads do not lead to heaven. All religions do not teach the same things. We don’t all worship the same God. And all gods are not the one true God of the Scriptures. Our God is an Awesome God!<sup>3</sup>

## **B. A singular allegiance wooing a divided heart**

Why did God want complete allegiance? It is not primarily for His benefit, but for ours.

God is not needy. It is not as if he is acting like a clingy boyfriend or girlfriend. It is not as if God is saying, “Please, please worship me only. Otherwise, I’ll be sad, lonely, unfulfilled. I need you.” No, God is self-existent and self-sufficient. God does not have needs that must be met by anyone or anything.

*Psalm 50:12, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine and all it contains.”*

*Isaiah 66:1-2, “Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus, all these things came into being, declares the Lord.”*

*Acts 17:25, “Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything.”*

If suddenly everyone on earth became blind, the sun would still shine. If there were no creaturely eyes to see, forests would still be beautiful, snow capped peaks would still be majestic. If there were no creaturely ears to hear, waterfalls would still roar. In the same way, if everyone denied God’s existence, He would still be all that He is.<sup>4</sup>

A. W. Tozer put it this way: *“To believe in God adds nothing to Him; to doubt Him takes nothing away from Him.”*

Why then does he give us this command if it were not for his benefit? He gives it primarily for our benefit. He guides us to the only safe path.

When I was a boy of about 7 years of age our family took a trip to the Yellowstone National Park. We saw the geysers and the beauty of the Yellowstone River. We saw the bears begging food scraps. Then we went to an area where the boiling sulfur waters had percolated close to the surface of the ground. Pools of bubbling water were scattered around an area about the size of a football field. The ground between the caldrons of steaming water looked unstable and thin, as if a footstep could break through like walking on an icy pond in winter. But this was summer, and the ground wasn't ice, and underneath was not cold water, but boiling sulfuric water. Before we walked out on the boardwalks that meandered around this area, my dad took me to a large sign at the entrance to the boardwalks. He read it to me. It said something like this: "Stay on the boardwalks. Beside the boardwalks are caldrons of boiling water and unstable soil. Stepping off the boardwalk may result in scalding and/or death. Stay on the boardwalks." My dad said, "Son, do you understand that warning?" I nodded my head. He said, "I'm not going to hold your hand, but you'd better not fool around out there." I didn't. I walked in the middle of the boardwalk and didn't even think of pushing my brother.

The Ten Commandments are much like those boardwalks. The commands are not for the benefit of God. They are for the benefit of his children. He loves us and has given us the boardwalk to circumnavigate this world. Don't step off into the scalding water of adultery, or you will be burned. The boardwalks are the commands. They are there for our benefit because God loves us and knows what is best.

It the first commandment God makes it clear that His people are to have an exclusive relationship with Him. Even though most translations read, "You shall have no other gods before me" that doesn't mean, "You can worship all the gods you want, I just want to be your favorite." He is saying, "Worship ONLY me. I am to be your ONLY God."

These words remind us God sees our relationship with Him much like a marriage relationship. It's not enough to stand at the altar and say, "You'll be my FAVORITE girlfriend!" The words of the marriage vow say, "Forsaking all other..." And the words of the First Commandment mean the same: "Forsaking all other pretender gods, you will have no other gods besides me."

What gods do you tend to hold in the grasp of your hands? (Invite people to hold their hands in a grasping gesture to their chest.) What gods do you worship, hold dear, or trust for your future? Are they the false gods of pleasure, possessions, money, family, position, insurance, etc.? Would you be willing now, in obedience to the First Commandment, to open your grasping hands and hold out open palms toward God. By doing so, you indicate you have relinquished to Him alone the place of God in your heart.

<sup>1</sup> The **pronunciation** of *YHWH*:

The original Hebrew word was composed of four consonants with vowel pointings to indicate how the four consonants were to be pronounced. However, Jewish rabbis read Leviticus 24:16, “The one who *blasphemes* the name of the LORD shall be put to death.” Although it was commendable that they had a proper sense of the sacredness of this name, the rabbis went to an extreme in application of this verse. They thought any sinful person “speaking” the sacred name might be endangered of blasphemy. So, they applied the verse as if it read, “The one who *speaks* the name...shall be put to death.” To guard against one “speaking” the name, they removed the vowel pointings.

When for the first time the vowels were inserted in the Hebrew Bible in the 7th Century A.D., the vowels of the word “aDoNaY”, “Lord,” were written with the consonants *YHWH* to indicate that, for reasons of reverence, this word was to be substituted in reading aloud. The form “Jehovah” is a transliteration of the resulting hybrid. It first came into use in the 14th Century A.D. through the failure of Christian scholars to recognize the origin and purpose of the vocalization.

Scholars have deduced from Greek transcriptions that the most likely arrangement of vowel pointings results in the pronunciation of “*Yahweh*”, not Jehovah.

<sup>2</sup> The **meaning** of *YHWH* expressed from its root:

The four-letter name *YHWH* (*Yahweh*) is derived from the verb *HAYAH*, “to be.” The most commonly held view is that *Yahweh* is a *qal* form meaning “He is.” The term carries the idea of eternity, absoluteness and self-existence (nature of God). It may also involve a future sense, “He will be” conveying the thought of the ever faithful God in dynamic truth (relationship to God). The fundamental idea of *Yahweh* is “I am who I am.”

<sup>3</sup> Today there are those who want to keep the Ten Commandments out of courtrooms and other government funded facilities. I understand why many in our pluralistic society oppose posting the Ten Commandments. Maybe they understand something about the Commandments we don’t. Most people don’t mind reinforcing the parts about stealing and killing and lying. Everybody pretty much agrees those are societal “no-no’s”. They don’t really mind the part about being kind to your parents. Most everybody finds those comfortable. The part the opponents of the Ten Commandments can’t live with is the first command: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

They understand how powerful that command is. It commands our allegiance to the God of the Scriptures. And He then becomes the exclusive authority behind the command to obey the other nine. You can’t merely dismiss a commandment just because you don’t feel like obeying it. If there really is only one God, if he really is the only savior of the oppressed and enslaved, then he must be obeyed.

<sup>4</sup> Why does he need us? Why does he need little ol’ ME??

- 1) **So I might behold and respond to His glory.** John 17:24
- 2) **So I might be an expression of His life in the world now.** John 20:21 states Jesus’ commission to us to be sent. How do the following verses indicate our current ministry in expressing God? John 6:57; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:4; Phil. 1:21
- 3) **So God’s glory may be revealed in us!** Romans 8:18-19 NIV “*Teach us, O God, that nothing is necessary to Thee. Were anything necessary to Thee that thing would be the measure of Thine imperfection: and how could we worship one who is imperfect? If nothing is necessary to Thee, then no one is necessary, and if no one, then not we. Thou dost seek us though Thou does not need us. We seek Thee because we need Thee, for in Thee we live and move and have our being. Amen*”