

# Exodus 20:4-6

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*The 2nd commandment bans the manufacture of idols or objects that represent nature to worship. The LORD will judge those who reject Him but reward those who love and obey Him.*

The second commandment banned the manufacture of any image that would be used as an object of worship. The Hebrew word for *idol* (“pesel”) refers to something made of wood or stone fashioned to represent something to be worshipped (Isaiah 44:17). The Israelites were prohibited from making *an idol* or from making *any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth*. In other words, nothing in the created natural world was to be represented or worshipped as a god.

Israel was *not to worship them or serve them*. The verb *to worship* refers to the act of bowing down before a superior or a ruler in order to show reverence and obedience (Genesis 37:9-10; 1 Kings 1:16). The verb *to serve* means following the commands of the superior, which would include making offerings (Exodus 10:26; Isaiah 19:21). The people had willingly entered into a covenant agreement with God, so to agree to serve another ruler would be an act of treason. They would break their treaty with God as their ruler and enter a treaty with another god to rule over them.

The LORD is making it clear that Israel cannot serve the deities of the surrounding nations and still serve Him. It is a binary choice. They cannot serve other gods while keeping their end of the “deal” in the mutual covenant in which they have entered. There is also a practical matter here that the purpose of the covenant is violated if Israel becomes like the other nations. They will then not fulfill the priestly function to demonstrate a superior way of living. They will just be like the other nations.

The Israelites were prohibited from making any artistic representation as an object of worship. This would have included making an idol to represent the LORD Himself. The Creator of the universe was never to be represented by any aspect of His creation. The creation itself reflects God’s glory (Psalm 19). This prohibition also makes clear that God is not subject to being manipulated like other gods. One of the primary attractions of paganism is the promise that you can manipulate the god and get what you want through your service

(which often included sexual promiscuity, which was an added attraction). God pursues the best for Israel. He is not trying to “buy” their allegiance. He is leading them to understand their best interest lies in obedience to His commands.

The LORD states that *I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God*. The word for *jealous* (Heb. “qanna”) is translated by the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament or LXX) as “zealous.” To be jealous is to have a desire for that which is rightfully yours. This differs from envy, which is a desire for that which is not rightfully yours. The LORD’s people have committed to Him and agreed to this covenant. God is making clear that there will be consequences if they decide to disobey His commands and break the covenant. God demanded that Israel keep its covenants with other nations as well. He disciplined Israel for breaking a covenant with the Gibeonites that had been made some four hundred years prior ([2 Samuel 21:1](#)). Also, a major reason God exiled Israel to Babylon is because they broke their treaty with Babylon and instead trusted in Egypt ([Ezekiel 17:11-21](#)). God warns Israel that there will be severe consequences for breaking their treaty with Him and trusting in other gods instead.

The covenant with Israel was like a marriage. God, as the husband, wants His wife to be loyal to Him, as He is loyal to her. The marital analogy of God with Israel will be used throughout the scriptures, such as in [Ezekiel 16](#) and the book of Hosea. To worship idols is to separate from the one true God. The LORD considered it spiritual adultery ([Hosea 4:12](#)). The Israelites were entering into a covenant not unlike that of marriage, and to worship other deities was tantamount to adultery. Any devout husband will be jealous for the fidelity of his wife.

Violating this commandment is not without consequences. For those who make and worship idols, the LORD promised *visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me*. The word *visiting* (Heb. “paqad”) has the idea of the LORD actively working in a person’s life, whether it be to bestow something good (as in [Genesis 21:1](#); [Ruth 1:6](#); [1 Samuel 2:21](#)) or to execute judgment (here and in [Jeremiah 11:22](#)).

This *visiting* was to occur *on the third and the fourth generations*. In the Hebrew, the word *generations* is missing and the words *third* and *fourth* are plural. It literally reads “upon the thirds and upon the fourths.” But *generations* is implied, therefore added by the translators.

Even though the judgement was certain, God built in mercy and a time for repentance. Because God was slow to judge did not mean the judgment would not come. Rather it meant that God was merciful, and desired to wait for two or three generations before fully executing His judgement. We can see this principle applied by God even upon pagan nations, as God was reluctant to judge Nineveh ([Jonah 4:11](#)). God also delayed judging the Amorites until the “fourth generation” because the “iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” ([Genesis 15:16](#)).

In contrast to the judgment against those who violate this commandment, the LORD promised *showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments*. The word *lovingkindness* (Heb. “chesed”) is an important word in the Old Testament. It is best translated “loyal love” and is used frequently in the Psalms when declaring who the LORD is ([Psalms 18:50](#), [25:10](#), [100:5](#), and many others). It is connected with His faithfulness ([Psalms 36:5](#)) and His compassion ([Jeremiah 16:5](#)). Here, the LORD declared His loyalty *to thousands*. Compare this with the thirds and fourths earlier in the previous verse. “Generations” is implied in association with the *thousands* as well. The LORD was declaring that His *lovingkindness* would last infinitely longer than His judgment. The Suzerain God said He would reward those who *love Him and keep His commandments*. Those who love the LORD are those who remain faithful to His covenant.

Since God’s *lovingkindness* lasts for *thousands* of generations, and that time extends beyond the *third and fourth generations* who might experience judgement, does that mean that His *lovingkindness* is ongoing even while God was executing judgment? The answer is yes. In fact, a quite famous verse from Jeremiah illustrates this point. The verse states:

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”  
([Jeremiah 29:11](#))

This verse is stated by God in the midst of the initiation of His great judgment upon Israel for their lack of faithfulness, exiling them out of the Promised Land to Babylon ([1 Chronicles 9:1](#)). The Babylonian exile lasted for seventy years. Then the return took another seventy years or so, until the wall of Jerusalem was restored under the leadership of Nehemiah.

It is typical for contracts to have a provision for notice and time to cure when a violation is detected. God instituted a grace period of three to four *generations*, but the judgement would be certain if there was no

repentance. However, the timing makes clear that God's lovingkindness would continue for Israel even in the midst of judgement.

**Biblical Text:**

**“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.<sup>5</sup> You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**