

**D.J. Reed**  
October 2, 2011

**Sermon Series: "Gotta Go Through It"**  
**"God"**  
**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20**

**Chilson Hills Church**  
**Howell, MI**

Netflix customers got an e-mail this week that began like this:

"I messed up. I owe you an explanation."

It was from Reed Hastings, the founder and CEO of Netflix. And the purpose of the letter was to reach out to Netflix subscribers and address their anger and annoyance over the recent price hikes.

He continued:

"It is clear from the feedback over the past two months that many members felt we lacked respect and humility in the way we announced the separation of DVD and streaming (services) and the price changes. That was certainly not our intent, and I offer my sincere apology. Let me explain what we are doing."

Whoa. The CEO of a huge corporation not only confessed that "he messed up," but he also admitted that he lacked respect, humility... and he apologized. AND, he felt compelled to explain his decision!

Wow! I don't believe we would ever hear that from a CEO of one of the Big Three automakers would we?

Several decades ago, executives of companies and Heads of states would never have dreamed of such a statement. To confess wrong-doing made one appear weak and to apologize was like groveling.

But times have changed. Now, we like our leaders accessible, more human. We like our leaders to show a little humility. We like it when they apologize.

In Exodus chapter 20, God is not that kind of leader. We read in chapter 19 that God is presented in a thick cloud on the top of Mt. Sinai. Thick smoke wraps around the mountain. God's presence is announced with a deafening trumpet blast from the sky. Lightning flashes, thunder booms, the entire mountain shakes violently.

God calls Moses to the top of the mountain and tells Moses to tell the people that they are not to come near the mountain or they will die. The mountain is holy and the people are not to breach the perimeter of the mountain or else....

This is a far cry from the CEO of Netflix isn't it? Accessible? No way. Apologetic and humble? Yeah right! Approachable? Not unless you see smoke, lightning and thunder as something you'd like to hug.

A television show I still miss is "LOST," the fantastic, seven season science-fiction series that chronicled the gripping adventures of the survivors of a plane wreck on a mysterious island.

The story is so complex and has so many layers that I won't try to explain it further. But one of the many compelling parts of the show was the main villain of the story – "The Smoke Monster."

It rattled like a whispery diamondback and attacked like a maniacal python. It was composed of black smoke and at times, you could see images flashing inside of it like lightning.

The Smoke Monster was said to be a security system for the island, protecting its greatest treasures and secrets. It clearly had intelligence, and it killed without remorse.

When I read the passage that leads up to Exodus 20, I think of that smoke monster. Stay away or you will certainly die.

But it is out of this terrifying smoke that the greatest rules of all time are uttered. The foundation of Jewish society (and, as some would say, the foundation of all law and order) was shouted from a volcano with a terrifying display of a natural fireworks. It was the original "Shock and Awe" campaign.

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house (which includes wives, slaves, oxen, donkeys or any other possession).

These were all thundered from on high, shaking the ground with ferocious power and the people shook with fear.

Now, I know that this is a big moment in history and all, but couldn't God have toned it down a bit?

Couldn't God bring the people together for a cookout? Couldn't God set up a camp fire and then gather everyone around and then set The Ten Commandments to a fun, campy little tune that would endear everyone to God and God's commandments? Couldn't God establish himself as a friendly, easy-to-relate to kind of leader?

I suppose God could've chosen that route, but would it have been as effective?

When Danny was young and just beginning to learn words, there were several lessons Danny needed to learn. He had to learn these lessons and he had to learn them quick.

He needed to know that he couldn't climb the stairs just yet. He needed to know that he couldn't touch the stove.

And each time we taught him these lessons they were often delivered with a sharp tone. "No!" "Hot!" And once he learned "Hot!" we had a word that we could use to warn him about everything.

When we wanted to warn him about the dangers of the street, we said, "That's hot!" And he knew that the street was not to be touched. When we didn't want him to touch a glass figurine in a gift store, we said again, "That's hot!" And you could pretty much take it to the bank that Danny wouldn't touch it.

In order to establish the most important rules, we had to be a bit stern, and we had to use language that would instill a bit of fear. We needed to put an end to a certain behavior immediately. We couldn't wait so that the desire to obey would develop gradually. We needed instant obedience.

These Ten Commandments were that important. God wanted the people to know them now. They were essential for the survival of their community and their nation. They needed to be burned into their minds and hearts, and so God used fear and stern, uncompromising words to communicate them.

In the last two years, no book has generated as much buzz in the world of parenting as Amy Chua's book, "Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother."

Chua points out that the secrets behind the success of stereotypically, high-performing Chinese children is the Chinese mother who uses strict, Old World, uncompromising values.

This is different from Western parents who she says are indulgent and permissive. Most Western kids, she points out are "soft and entitled," because self-esteem is stressed above achievement.

But Chua stresses academic performance above all, refusing to accept a mediocre grade, insisting on drilling and practice, and instilling respect for authority by using uncompromising expectations, occasional public shaming and even insults from time to time.

And the results of this of this parenting style have been... impressive. Chua and her Jewish husband (both are professors at Yale Law) raised two girls with this philosophy, and her children have achieved amazing success in school and music performance.

Chua and her “Tiger Mother” mentality demonstrate the effectiveness of hard-line, quaking-mountain tactics when it comes to raising children. And tough-as-nails teachers and no-nonsense coaches show us that it works in shaping adults as well. Fearful discipline can get good results in academics, athletics and music.

But does it work with faith? I have heard many of you speak of your time in religious parochial schools or your childhood in strict, rigid churches. Your earliest lessons about faith were delivered with stern words, spankings and even switches. I have heard many of you speak of uncompromising, narrow-minded theologies that made you more fearful than comforted or confident. And many of you would say that “No, this was not effective; in fact, it was counter-productive to your faith.

These institutions bought into the shaking mountain model of education. And Moses defends that model in verse 20, “God has come only to test you and to put the fear God upon you so that you do not sin.” It’s a great behavior modifier. “It washes that sin right out of your hair.” It creates good performers and achievers. But at what cost?

We read about the cost in verses 18 through 21 of Exodus chapter 20. The people obey, but they are afraid. They decide to not go any where near the mountain. They don’t want to talk to God, they want Moses to talk to God first and then tell them what God has said. The people stand at a distance, obedient but fearful.

Forceful instruction using fearful tactics can break the wildest of beasts. It can modify the behavior of any creature with a will. But if there is no tenderness, affection or love, there is no relationship. That’s the cost of fear without the affirming, life-giving force of love.

This is why we can’t stop reading here as some people do.

Many people say, “See, look, this is the picture of God presented in the Old Testament.”

God is a terrorist, getting people to do his will by using fear tactics. God is angry. God is a cold, stoic, authoritative, oppressive and down-right dictatorial. And people – understandably – don’t like this picture of God. In fact they outright reject this God, claiming the idea of this God is not noble and certainly isn’t worth following either.

So, they stop there; right there at the smoking, trembling mountain of terror. They stop with that picture of God – an angry, fear-inducing God – and they say, “I aint going round it. I aint going under it, I aint going over it, and I sure aint going through it either.” I’m stopping right here. I have no use for a God like this.

But if they kept reading the narrative of Exodus, they would see that God isn’t all anger, rage and awesome power.

Not long after Moses received The Ten Commandments, Moses goes up to the mountain by himself and hears God’s radical, wonderful new plan.

God will be moving down from the mountain and into the camp of the Israelites so that God could be close to God’s people.

And for seven chapters we read of God’s plans for a new house – called a tabernacle – God’s home on earth.

But then the people do a big “no-no.” They make for themselves an idol, thinking God had left them and believing Moses was dead.

God gets angry. Moses gets angry and then breaks stone tablets that The Ten Commandments were written on. God and the people of Israel are far apart again.

But then at the beginning of chapter 34, God makes two new replacement tablets for Moses, and this time, instead of thundering his commands, it says that God descends and stands with Moses saying, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”

Here we have a completely different picture of God. One who is “slow to anger,” “merciful,” and “gracious.” God forgives and God is faithful to this generation and the generations to come.

Yes, God sometimes appears as a terrifying God of awesome power – we shouldn’t deny the fact that God sometimes is presented as violent and angry.

But it also says that God is “abounding in steadfast love.” God moves in among God’s people. God gives second chances and doesn’t give up on the people that continually reject him.

The God of the Scriptures, the God we worship here today is impossibly complex and wildly unpredictable. We cannot discern or figure out what God will or won’t do.

But if we take The Scriptures seriously we believe that everything God does is rooted in God’s nature - which is good. And if we believe that God is good, our fear of God is a different kind of fear.

In C.S. Lewis’ classic book, “The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,” four children are magically transported to the land of Narnia that is overtaken by a never-ending winter caused by the The White Witch.

As they explore the land, the children come upon a family of talking Beavers who tell the children that the only hope for this land is Aslan.

Aslan, they wonder, who is Aslan?

“Is he a man?” asked one.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond- the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake” said Mrs Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

The shaking, quaking, smoky mountain of Exodus 20 shows us that God isn’t safe. There are plenty of examples of this in The Bible. God is powerful and able to do things that can scare the bravest of people. God is a lion, complete with claws and teeth and the ability to do away with us.

But God is also a good lion who uses his power in good ways. And God is personal. God is tender. God is slow to anger and “abounding in steadfast love.” And there are plenty of examples of this in Scripture as well.

God, brothers and sisters, is “scary good”

## LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, October 2, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=184389413>

**Featured Scripture Reflection:** “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’” – **Exodus 20:20**

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=184410035>

**Opening Icebreaker:** Share about an experience when you were “scared straight.” (i.e. – a near tragedy, severe consequences, or a threat compelled you to make some life changes)

### Scripture Questions

#### What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Exodus 20:1-17**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=184389444> What stands out to you about what you just read? What did you like about what was just read? What didn't you like? What questions do you have?
- Read **Exodus 20:18-21**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=184389471> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? What did you like about what was just read? What didn't you like? What did you learn about God from this passage?
- Read **Exodus 34:1-7**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=184389493> Think about what you've just read. How does it compliment what was read in the previous passages?

#### How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the “Good News” in these passages of Scripture?
- After this discussion, how will you apply what you learned to your life this week?

#### God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

#### A prayer

God, we believe that you are good, gracious, merciful and loving. And at the same time we know that you are powerful and worthy of our respect and fear. We worship you today, God, as a truly awesome God who is completely unlike anything in this world. Amen.