



Week 6 Book of the Covenant

Day 1- Exodus 21:1, 12-15, 23-25, 33-36; Exodus 22:5-6

21:1 "These are the ordinances that you shall set before them:

12 "Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death. 13 If it was not premeditated but came about by an act of God, then I will appoint for you a place to which the killer may flee. 14 But if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution.

15 "Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death.

23 If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

33 "If someone leaves a pit open or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, 34 the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to its owner but keeping the dead animal.

35 "If someone's ox hurts the ox of another, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide the price of it, and the dead animal they shall also divide. 36 But if it was known that the ox was accustomed to gore in the past and its owner did not restrain it, the owner shall restore ox for ox but keep the dead animal.

22:5 "When someone causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over or lets livestock loose to graze in someone else's field, restitution shall be made from the best in the owner's field or vineyard.

6 "When fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, the one who started the fire shall make full restitution.

Understanding the passage:

Last week, we read about the Ten Commandments, and though they are the most famous of the laws that God gave to the Israelites, they were just the tip of the iceberg. There are a total of 613 laws in the Torah, many of which immediately follow the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus.

The Ten Commandments were the broad brushstrokes of the moral principles that would guide the people of Israel; they are given as apodictic laws, which are absolute commandments with no

conditions or qualifications. The laws in the Book of the Covenant were the nitty gritty detailed laws that applied those principles to various situations; they are given as casuistic law (if..., then...). The word translated as “ordinance” in the first verse of chapter 21 may also be translated as “judgements,” which gives the sense that these are meant to be precedents and models for legal decisions and quandaries rather than an exhaustive list of commands meant to apply to every possible situation.

The giving of a law code was not a novel idea in the ancient Near East. Based on archeological evidence, civilizations had been producing such codes from as early as the late third millennium BCE. The laws in the Book of the Covenant are essentially the terms and conditions that God specifically wants the Israelites to sign on with to become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

It is tempting to set these ancient laws against what modern people consider just in the 21st century CE. It is an unhelpful way to read and interpret them, especially those that would be revolting to any reasonable person today. Though the laws may not seem to do as much as a modern reader would want them to, God was using the framework of an existing society (law codes) to speak into the culture and ethos of the Israelites. The Jewish ethicist Leon Kast wrote, “We must read these laws in their historical context and in relation to the prevailing customs at the time they were introduced. Considered against that background, God’s ordinances for Israel represent a giant step toward a more humane jurisprudence and a more moral way of life.”

The most notable part of them is that the laws are fundamentally concerned with the welfare of others as opposed to the welfare of oneself. For the three months since they left Egypt, the Israelites have been preoccupied with their own welfare. God is redirecting their attention from themselves individually to the welfare of their community. These laws are focused on how to relate to God and others. You’ll notice that the laws about the destruction of someone else’s property are less concerned with restoring honor than about restitution. This puts them in direct contrast to the other contemporary law codes of neighboring nations that are focused on punishments that restore honor.

Questions for reflection:

1. Because the Book of the Covenant does not include an exhaustive list of commands, but rather a set of precedents, what quality would be important for a leader of the Israelites?
2. Do you see any overlap with your personal values and those in the passages from today’s reading?
3. Why do you think the laws focus more on restitution than restoring honor?

Day 2 - Exodus 21:1-11, 16, Exodus 22:21-24, Exodus 23:9

21:1 “These are the ordinances that you shall set before them: 2 “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. 3 If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. 4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out alone. 5 But if the slave declares, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person,’ 6 then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him for life. 7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. 8 If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. 9 If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. 10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the

food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.

¹⁶ "Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death.

^{22:21} "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²² You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³ If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; ²⁴ my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

^{23:9} "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Understanding the passage:

The Book of the Covenant begins with a set of laws concerning slavery. God just rescued the Israelites from oppressive slavery, so we know that it is contrary to what God wants for the people. It follows that our expectation would be that God would use these laws to prohibit slavery in all forms. Unfortunately, that is not what we encounter in these passages.

The practice of chattel slavery – in which slaves were regarded as property, not people – was common, unquestioned, and cruel. While God doesn't universally prohibit slavery, God does speak into this conventional cultural practice with laws that are contrary to the norm.

To start, it's helpful to review how one became a slave in the ancient Near East. There were four ways this happened:

1. Paupers = someone who could not make a living and worked for another person in exchange for room and board. This included women who were sold off by their fathers into marriages so the fathers wouldn't have to continue to support them.
2. Debtors = someone who worked for a period of time in order to pay a debt. This is reminiscent of indentured servitude.
3. Thieves = someone who was unable to make restitution for their thievery would have to work off the items that were stolen or ruined.
4. Kidnapping = someone who was stolen and forced into slavery without any ability to escape.

Because most of the African slave trade in the United States in the 1700s and 1800s was the result of kidnapping, our ideas about slavery center on that kind of forced labor. While God speaks to the way slaves should be treated (which seems like God is condoning slavery), it is important to note that God absolutely bans the kidnapping of people and the resulting oppression and slavery to which they are subjected. The word for kidnapping in Exodus 21:16 is *gonev*, which is the same word that was used in the eighth commandment, "Do not steal."

God doesn't ban slavery outright, but God does prohibit slavery based on kidnapping, which was a revolutionary idea in this time. The law is also revolutionary in its release of slaves every seven years. The law prevented any kind of permanent slavery within the Israelite community. Regardless of how much debt one owed, all slaves were freed at the end of seven years. This is an echo of God granting freedom to the Israelites from their slavery at no cost to them.

This passage also introduces the concept of reciprocal justice. It limits the consequences of an action to the boundaries of the offending action. This group of people was similar to their peers, all of whom acted on their basest instincts when exacting revenge. The theft of someone's livestock

would likely end up with the thief being murdered. God wants the people to treat each other with more mercy and justice than they were accustomed and to view other human lives as valuable.

Questions for reflection:

1. How does it make you feel that God did not ban slavery outright?
2. Do you see any grace in these passages? If so, where? If not, what would grace in this context look like to you?
3. How have these laws shaped or affected our modern understanding of human rights?

Day 3 - Exodus 22:25-27

22:25 "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. ²⁶If you take your neighbor's cloak as guarantee, you shall restore it before the sun goes down, ²⁷for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as a cover. In what else shall that person sleep? And when your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

Understanding the passage:

The Book of the Covenant is a prescription for living together in community. Four hundred years of living under Egyptian rule resulted in people who were used to oppression and cruelty. People who are abused are more likely to become abusers themselves when they gain any kind of autonomy or power; the Israelites were not exempt from that consequence. Instead of abusing the poor in lending, God tells them to be people who operate under the principles of protection and justice.

Like the other laws in the Book of the Covenant, this was a novel concept. Every other society in the ancient Near East operated on a class system that applied different laws to each class, with the poorest experiencing the least protection. God has been referred to in Exodus as the God of Jacob, which is an interesting title considering God is the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Joseph, and God of Moses as well. Why is Jacob highlighted? It could be that Jacob, as a second son whom God blessed and worked through, is a perfect reminder that God doesn't always choose the first, the expected, the strongest, the most powerful. Sometimes – oftentimes – God chooses the person on the margins. In this case, God is showing favor to the poor.

Part of the motivation behind these laws is that they would establish protections that would prevent people from living in poverty forever. Modern readers know that predatory lending and payday loan companies operate in a manner that keeps people in poverty because they pay so much in interest that they are unable to ever get out of debt. God doesn't want people trapped in that cycle.

Questions for reflection:

1. Can you think of other examples in scripture of God protecting the marginalized?
2. How do these laws establish a new form of justice?
3. Are these laws still appropriate today? Could someone run a successful business while following these laws?

Day 4 - Exodus 23:4-5

23:4 "When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

⁵"When you see the donkey of one who hates you struggling under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

Understanding the passage:

As we move through these laws, you might notice how specific they are. It has already been noted that they are not a completely exhaustive list of laws that cover every scenario, but they do cover a multitude of possibilities. From the first covenant that God made with Abraham, it has been God's goal to form a nation of priests that would bless all of the nations on the earth. In order for that to happen, the people have to be bearers of God's justice, mercy, grace and love. This means that they must be fully governed by God – in every facet of their lives. There is not one part of their lives that they can keep reserved from God.

These scriptures about how to treat the livestock that belongs to an enemy is a good example of the way that God's character should be fully present in people's lives. Based on their time in Egypt as well as all of the other neighboring societies' law codes, the expected response when someone comes upon an enemy's lost livestock would not be to bring it back. A more common response would be, at minimum, to continue to let it wander, or even to take it for oneself.

In one of the rabbinic midrash commentaries written on the Torah in the 5th-7th centuries, this parable is given:

“Two ass drivers who hated each other were walking on the road when the ass of one lay down under its burden. His companion saw it, and at first he passed on. But then he reflected: Is it not written in the Torah, ‘When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him.’

“So he returned, lent a hand, and helped his enemy in loading and unloading. He began talking to his enemy, ‘Release a bit here, pull up over there, unload over here.’

“Thus peace came about between them, so that the driver of the overloaded ass said [to himself]: ‘Did I not suppose that he hated me? But look how compassionate he was with me.’

“By and by, the two entered an inn, ate and drank together, and became close friends. What caused them to make peace and become friends? Because one of them kept what is written in the Torah, ‘When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him.’”

(Midrash *Tanhuma B*, Mishpatim #1)

When someone is treated with mercy and respect, it is unlikely that they will remain an enemy forever. The demonstration of God's inclusion, grace, and care is a balm that can heal many relationships. Even if it doesn't have the desired effect on the relationship between the enemies, it prevents the one who could help but chooses not to from becoming dehumanized and desensitized to others' pain.

Questions for reflection:

1. Have you resisted helping enemies in the past?
2. What would it take for you to help an enemy?
3. In your mind, picture a situation in which someone you see as an enemy helps you with something. How does it change your heart to experience that?

Day 5 - Exodus 24:1, 9-18

24:1 Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance.

9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, 10 and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. 11 God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there; I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up onto the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come back to you. Look, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites. 18 Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Understanding the passage:

Moses and God's encounter on the mountain has two parts. In verses 12-14, God calls Moses to ascend the mountain to meet God. Once Moses has reached a certain point, a cloud covers the mountain (verse 15) and the glory of God descends down to be present with Moses.

For someone who was so unsure of his call to lead the Israelites just a few months prior, one could imagine that Moses was overwhelmed each time he was in the presence of God. The experience of being on the mountaintop and communing with God was likely encouraging to him. And yet... he couldn't stay there forever. He had to go back down to the people, to their problems, to regular life. It's tempting for us to want to stay in that state of utopia when we find ourselves on the mountaintop with God. When we experience thin places that make us feel especially close to God and in sync with the Holy Spirit, it is hard to pull ourselves away in order to return to our normal lives. But just as Moses could not spend his whole life on the mountaintop, nor can we. Part of the reason that God met Moses on that mountain – and the reason that God meets us on our own mountaintops – is to give the power and encouragement needed to continue to press on and move forward.

Moses' ascent on the mountain cements the notion that law must be interpreted with God's presence in mind. God is not a creator God who is uninvolved in the world, as Deism might prescribe. Instead, God is intimately connected and concerned with the people.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, the theologian James K.A. Smith writes, "The announcement of the law reminds us that we inhabit not "nature," but *creation*, fashioned by a Creator, and that there is a certain grain to the universe – grooves and tracks and norms that are part of the fabric of the world. And all of creation flourishes best when our communities and relationships run with the grain of those grooves... That is why the law... is an invitation to find the good life by welcoming the boundaries of law that guide us into the grooves that constitute the grain of the universe and are conducive to flourishing."

The grooves and tracks are not just social and not just religious. They encompass every part of a person's life. As such, the laws in the Book of the Covenant are presented in a way that alternates focus between social and religious concerns – not letting them outweigh one another nor be artificially separated. For instance, the religious focus on keeping the Sabbath in 23:12 carries with

it an inseparable social implication (“so that your ox and your donkey may have relief and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.”)

Questions for reflection:

1. Do you think this story is more about Moses’ ascent to God, or God’s descent down to the people? Why is that important?
2. Can you imagine what it would have been like to eat and drink in God’s presence? How does the Lord’s Supper draw us near to God in the same way?
3. Why does God give the law with a balance between social and religious commands?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think what the Israelites have just been through affects their understanding of the law that God is giving them?
2. Why might the Israelites been resistant to a non-violent society?
3. How did you interpret “an eye for an eye” before this week’s study? Did it fit with your understanding of God? How do you feel about it now?
4. What is God’s ultimate goal in giving the people the law?
5. Pastor Colin said that we should apply what God says in Exodus about resident aliens to those who are outside of our communities in modern day. What would that look like in your life?
6. Why do you think the command for the celebrations was so important for the Israelites in this season? What difference would it have made for you?
7. What is challenging to you with these laws?
8. What is your biggest takeaway from this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: