

**[Quote SOS verses with congregation]**

The book is called “Exodus,” but it doesn’t end when “the exodus” from Egypt is accomplished. There are three parts to the book:

- the escape from Egypt (ch 1-19)
- the Ten Commandments (ch 20)
- the Tabernacle (ch 21-40)

We’ve tried to capture the theme of these three sections with the subseries titles: “Getting Out,” “Walking Straight,” and “Drawing Near.” These aren’t three separate topics, however. They are integrally related. Worship has everything to do with liberation from slavery. You’re not really free, you’ve not really “gotten out,” until you’ve come into relationship with a new Master, until you’ve “drawn near.”

The large portion of Exodus devoted to the tabernacle is not a regression from the grand story of deliverance. This is the goal of the exodus—God’s people responding to Him in worship and drawing near to Him in covenant relationship. Exodus opens with Israel as oppressed slaves, building store cities for Pharaoh (1:11), and it ends with Israel as redeemed worshippers, building a dwelling for their God.

Today’s text (ch 21-23) is one whole unit, and so we’re going to deal with it all at one time. It opens with a statement to that effect: “Now these are the rules that you shall set before them” (21:1), and those rules continue through 23:19. Notice in 24:7 this collection of laws is referred to as “the Book of the Covenant.” So this unit has a collective identity of its own; these aren’t just loose laws. This is The Book of the Covenant.

Rather than go through each law individually, we’re going to examine it as a whole. Our goal will be to understand first, what this text meant to its original audience. Remember, this was God’s word to Israel as they prepared to begin their new life in the Promised Land. It is specific to their situation and time, and we need to interpret it that way. Once we’ve grasped what it meant to them, then try to see what it offers to us in our day.

## THE NATURE OF THE LAW

### 1. Positive

For Israel, the law was not a burden. Remember, the Hebrew word for “Torah,” which we so often render “law,” actually means “teaching.” It was helpful instruction about how to form a stable, moral, productive society— we might say it was about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These chapters might seem tedious and obscure to us, but for Israel, it was time to really perk up their ears. Here was God’s handbook for their new life. Notice how the people responded:

**Exodus 24:7** *[Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."* (cf. also v 3)

Yes, their disobedience could be costly, but the Law itself was grace:

**Deuteronomy 32:47** *For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.*

### 2. Comprehensive

As you glance through chapters 21-23, you’ll notice these laws touch all different aspects of life:

Altars (20:22-26)

Tenure and treatment of slaves (21:1-11)

Violence: willful vs. accidental death, kidnapping (21:12-17)

Restitution (21:18-22:17) – lost time, injury to a pregnant woman or her baby, death cause by livestock, injury to livestock, robbery, crop damage from negligence, items held in trust, items borrowed or rented

Sorcery, bestiality, idolatry (22:18-20)

Foreigners, widows, orphans; compassionate lending (22:21-27)

Relationship with God (22:28-31)

Justice in court system, kindness to enemies, (23:1-9)

The Sabbath & Festivals (23:10-17)

Offerings (23:18-19)

There’s a point in all this diversity. It was a way of showing that God is concerned with everything. They live all of life, every area, in

relationship to Him. There is no secular/sacred distinction. These laws press God's claims into the nitty-gritty details of everyday life. Most people want to believe there are personal and private areas of my life that aren't governed by anyone's standards except my own. But God's law shows He has authority over every area of life.

### 3. Representative

At first when you read these laws, it might appear they are too specific to be all that useful. For example, injury to a neighbor's animal:

**Exodus 21:33-34** *When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, <sup>34</sup> the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.*

But what if the negligence takes another form—not an open pit but an unstable rock wall? Isn't this too situation-specific to be useful? Actually, it's this level of specificity that gives us a clue about how these laws were used. Most of these are case laws – specific examples of things that could happen, representative of other situations that might arise. Many of these laws demonstrate how to handle a variety of similar cases. Jurisprudence in America works much this same way—if a judge or lawyer can find an analogous ruling from another case, he or she will use it to help bring a judgment in this new situation. That's what God is doing here. In this vast set of case laws, He is depositing a whole set of precedent cases for the foundation of Israel's legal system.

### 4. Collective

The Book of the Covenant places a clear emphasis on the collective nature of life together. How do I treat my neighbor? My servants? My parents? My enemies? Foreigners?

- Slaves (21:1-11) No Israelite was to be in perpetual slavery, unless he chose that for himself out of love. Even slave women had certain protections written into law – revolutionary for this setting.
- Lending (22:25-27) compassionate lending – no interest, no hardship for fellow countryman. *The purpose for lending money is to help the poor, not make a profit.*

This collective emphasis in the Book of the Covenant shows that one's relationship with God is manifested in how he/she treats other people. *The quality of our relationship with God is shown by how we treat others – even strangers and enemies.*

## THE ROLE OF THE LAW

As I mentioned earlier, one temptation when you read something like this in the OT is to immediately ask, "What's the point of this for me?" And that's a good question. These portions of God's word are relevant.

**2 Timothy 3:16** *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...*

But it's not the *first* question we should ask. The *first* question we need to ask is "What did this mean to them?"

Here's what it's NOT for: to help them earn God's favor, get to heaven, or "get saved." God has never asks people to obey to be accepted. He had already made these people His own (cf. 19:4). So what was the role of the law in ancient Israel?

### 1. Express love to God

The Law showed Israel what was important to God. It helped them know what He enjoyed and wanted from them so they could please Him. This is what normally happens in a relationship where two people are growing in love for each other—they study one another and get to know one another's likes and dislikes so they can do (or avoid) those things. The Law is God's way of saying, "Here's what you need to know to show love to me. I delight in fairness, honesty, compassion, neighborliness, devotion."

This is the function of the covenant as God first described when they arrived at Sinai:

**Exodus 19:5** *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine.*

When God says "you shall be my treasured possession," He doesn't mean He'll redeem them. He's already done that. He means they will endear themselves to Him. Their obedience will deepen the relation-

ship. If they will keep the covenant, their obedience will make them stand out even more from all His other possessions.

## 2. Express their identity as redeemed people

Certain laws are tied directly to Israel's rescue from Egypt:

**Exodus 22:21** *You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*

**Exodus 23:9** *You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*

Their duties grow out of their identity. Who they are – namely, former slaves – should inform how they act. In Egypt, they experienced man's inhumanity to outsiders. Now they are to reflect God's love and goodness instead. Similarly, notice the rationale given for the Sabbath:

**Exodus 23:12** *Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.*

Again, their former status as slaves reminds them of the blessing of rest. In all of this, they are learning to live out their new identity, rather than simply mimicking what they saw before. These laws are careful safeguards to keep the people from becoming in any way like the Egyptians, who oppressed them.

## 3. Express God's own character

Holiness. A number of these laws seem to serve the single purpose of distinguishing Israel from the surrounding nations—to show they are distinct, different, i.e., holy.

**Exodus 20:26** *And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.*

The protection against indecent exposure was most likely intended to distinguish Israelite worship from Canaanite worship, where sexual rituals were used to provoke the gods into "procreative blessing."

**Exodus 23:19** *"You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.*

Likewise, this seems to have been a pagan worship practice, making this law a reaction against pagan worship. God's people were different, holy.

Compassion.

**Exodus 22:25-27** *If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact*

*interest from him. <sup>26</sup> If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, <sup>27</sup> for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.*

The express reason for this law is so the people will reflect God's own compassion.

Wisdom. The operating principle in Israel's system of civil law is restitution, not incarceration (21:18-22:17). Offenders weren't confined in a prison; they were ordered to repay and/or make amends. The more intentional the offense, the higher the cost to make amends for it.

**Exodus 22:1** *If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.*

**Exodus 22:5** *"If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard.*

Simple accidents required nothing. Negligence required restitution at the judge's discretion. Intentional harm was repaid in a multiple of the original offense.

This system of justice had several advantages over our system of penal incarceration: 1) direct compensation for the victim, 2) face-to-face interaction between victim and offender, 3) an immediate opportunity for the offender to change his ways and become a productive member of society, and 4) freedom for the rest of society from the burden of supporting offenders while they "do their time." This is just one example of how Israel's law would have put God's wisdom on display.

Justice:

**Exodus 21:23-25** *But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

This familiar phrase "an eye for an eye" (the *lex talionis*) isn't an example of primitive harshness. It's a merciful restriction on escalation and personal vengeance. More to the point, it's fair. It's a standard of justice that works for everyone, rich and poor alike. Not that a judge would enforce the *lex talionis* literally – ordering a defendant to lose an eye because he injured someone else's. Rather, it was applied idiomatically, with the penalty hurting the person as much as their negligence wounded the other. The goal were justice and the restraint

of personal vengeance.

The law functioned in all these ways for ancient Israel. It enabled them to display God's character, express their identity as His redeemed people, and express their love for Him.

**Exodus 19:5-6** <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

## THE APPLICATION OF THE LAW

Even when we understand the role of the law for Israel, applying it in our lives today is not a simple process. Some would divide the law into three categories—civil, ceremonial, and moral—and hold over only the moral laws for us today. But neither the OT nor the NT ever mentions these categories. In fact, the OT seems to mix all three types of laws together, making it hard if not impossible to distinguish them. Besides, if the only application of the OT law for us is to give us some moral duties, we might as well just ignore the OT altogether and stick to the NT. All the moral laws are repeated there, and we don't have to wade through all the weird, irrelevant stuff. No, there must be something more here for us than just an occasional moral obligation.

Others would say there's a kernel of application/underlying principle behind each law, and that's what applies to our lives. I've often tried to read the law this way in the past. But I've found it doesn't always hold up, because it's sometimes too hard to tell what that principle might be. Furthermore, and much more important, the "principle approach" doesn't do justice to how the death and resurrection of Jesus change things. Extracting principles from the Law doesn't do justice to the significance of what Jesus did.

So what do we do with this? Three applications:

- Let the Law teach you about God.

God's law flows out of who He is. The Book of the Covenant isn't just a

list of duties for Israel to perform. It's a revelation of God's character. This is why David could say things like:

**Psalm 119:77, 92,93,97** *Let your mercy come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight.* <sup>92</sup> *If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.* <sup>93</sup> *I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life.* <sup>97</sup> *Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.*

So use the Law to learn about God.

- Let the Law give you ideas for how to keep the First and Second Great Commandments.

**Matthew 22:36-40** <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

It's easy to assume we're loving God... until we read:

**Exodus 22:29** *You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.*

If you love God, you'll give Him your very best.

It's easy to assume we're loving toward other people... until we read:

**Exodus 23:4-5** <sup>4</sup> *If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him.* <sup>5</sup> *If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.*

If you are truly a loving person, you will go out of your way to help your enemies.

- Let the Law lead you to Jesus

When the people heard God's voice and saw the signs of His presence on the mountain (20:18-20), they requested a mediator – someone else who could go before God on their behalf. God granted one, but He didn't ultimately waver from His purpose of drawing near to them personally: "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you" (v 24). How? By means of an atoning sacrifice – "burnt offerings and peace offerings, sheep and oxen" (v 24).

Their obedience isn't ultimately the key. *Their repentance is. Their appeal for acceptance via the death of another.* Shed blood. A life surrendered. The symbol for this whole arrangement was an altar – the place where life-threatening wrath and welcoming mercy could meet and both be satisfied. Don't you see what that is about?

**Matthew 5:17-18** <sup>17</sup> *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* <sup>18</sup> *For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

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