

Warnings and Promises

TEXT: Ex 23:20-33

PHBF 03.17.13

Scr. Reading: Exodus 3:20-33

Drawing Near: Exodus, part 3

SOS Verse:

Exodus 19:4 *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

“Exodus” is the 2nd of 5 books called the “Pentateuch,” aka, the Law. In last week’s sermon on Exodus 21-23, we looked at a subset of laws within the Pentateuch known as “The Book of the Covenant.” That title gives us a helpful perspective on the OT Law, because it reminds us that this material wasn’t merely law code; for Israel, it was covenant. It was relational. These weren’t so much rules set to control their behavior; they were God’s instructions for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today’s text from the second half of Exodus 23 brings that into clearer focus. God sketches His promises that attach to the covenant—promise of blessing if they obey, and threat of disaster if they don’t.

The foundational promise is in verse 20:

Exodus 23:20 *Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.*

Protection and direction on their journey to “the place [God] has prepared.” What place is that? Verse 23 names the inhabitants: “the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.” And verse 31 gives the boundaries: “I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates.”

It’s a reiteration of the promise God originally made to Abraham:

Genesis 15:18-21 ¹⁸ *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."*

Similar boundaries, similar list of “-ites.” Israel is Abraham’s offspring (v 18), and here, 400 years after the original promise, they are on the brink of experiencing it.

There’s one major difference between God’s covenant with Abraham

and His covenant with Israel. His promise to Abraham was entirely unconditional—no ifs, no contingencies, nothing hypothetical. That’s the whole point of Genesis 15:

Genesis 15:7-9 *God said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." ⁸ But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."*

What follows is an Ancient Near-Eastern covenant ceremony: penalties (vv 9-10), promises (vv 13-16), and formal ratification (vv 17-21). The penalty was implied in the halved and bloody animal carcasses. The promises were spelled out, and then the promise-maker(s) would literally walk through the bloody carnage, implying: “May this happen to me if I don’t keep my promise.” You could tell which party in the covenant was making the promise and exposing himself to the penalty by watching who walked through the blood. Notice verse 17:

Genesis 15:17 *When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*

As a spirit, God has no body to “walk through” material things, but it’s clear what the smoking pot and flaming torch signify: God Himself is passing through the blood. It’s His answer to Abraham’s question: “How am I to know?” God is making a unilateral promise to Abraham, and putting His own life on the line, as it were, to make sure it happens. No conditions. No duties for Abraham to keep. God’s blessings are guaranteed, no matter what.

God’s covenant with Israel is different in this respect. The blessings are conditional:

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;*

Exodus 20:5-12 ⁵ *You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...*

⁷ ¶ *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. ¹² ¶ "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."*

Exodus 23:21-22 ²¹ *Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is*

in him. ²² ¶ "But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

God's covenant with Abraham was NOT conditional; His covenant with Israel WAS. Israel's possession of the land is dependent on *their faithfulness* to the covenant.

Look at the conditions in this passage. Here's what Israel must do to hold up their end of the covenant:

- v 21 Pay attention to, obey the angel God sends before them
- v 24a Do not bow down to or serve the Canaanites' gods
- v 24b Do not "do as they [Canaanites] do"
- v 24 overthrow them and destroy their icons of worship
- v 25 "serve the Lord your God"
- v 32 Make no covenant with the people of the land or their gods

In summary, their basic duty was to maintain exclusive loyalty to Yahweh as their God, obeying only Him, serving only Him, and eliminating any rival to Him from their homeland.

As long as they remain faithful to Yahweh this way, He will extend incredible blessing. If they disobey, He threatens incredible disaster.

BLESSINGS

Look at the blessings God promises in return for their faithfulness:

- v 22 To be an enemy to Israel's enemies
- v 25a "bless your bread and your water"
- v 25b "take sickness away from you"
- v 26a No miscarriages or barrenness
- v 26b Long life
- v 27 Terror, confusion, and cowardice among their enemies
 - "my terror" is likely just that – literal fear of Israel and their God, Yahweh (cf. 15:14-16, Joshua 2:8-11)
- v 28 "hornets" driving out the land's inhabitants
 - literal? Could be, but doesn't seem likely. Referred to 3x (Ex 23:28, Dt 7:20, Jos 24:12). The reference from Joshua is especially noteworthy, because there the Lord says He used hornets to drive out the two kings of the Amorites. That story is in Numbers 21, and a military conquest was involved. Israel did fight; they didn't just

watch angry bugs drive the people away and then walk in afterward. So I take "hornets" metaphorically for the help of the Lord, whatever form it might take.

- v 30 Incremental conquest, preserving the land from becoming a wilderness
- v 31 Land stretching from the Red Sea [southwest] to the Sea of the Philistines [i.e., the Mediterranean Sea along the west], and from the wilderness [southeast] to the Euphrates [northeast]

Other descriptions in the Pentateuch add to this list (Dt 28:1-14), but there's enough here to give the very clear sense that God is offering everything their hearts could desire, a veritable deluge of blessing. What a promise! What a God! What a privilege to be an Israelite! These blessings help us appreciate what God meant when He said earlier:

Exodus 19:5-6 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; ⁶ 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.

This level of prosperity would be hard to ignore. When these blessings started flowing in, the whole world would take notice.

WARNINGS

The warnings are just as dramatic. This text doesn't mention many specifics, but we learn elsewhere in the Law (cf. Dt 28:15ff) that the extent of the threats mirrors the extent of the blessings. Notice, warnings bookend this section. At the end:

Exodus 23:32-33 You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. ³³ They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

And at the beginning:

Exodus 23:21 Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.

The "him" whom they must obey is someone referred to in v 20 as "an angel." Before we get into who that is, just linger a moment over the utter absoluteness of this threat: "he will not pardon your transgression." This is striking, the warning that pardon for sin WILL NOT be available. No redo. No second chance. No forgiveness. No protection from the penalty.

Before you start trying to figure out what this *means*, just let it say what it says. “Well, maybe in the Hebrew...” No, the Hebrew means what the English says: [ESV, NAS, KJV] “He will not pardon your transgression” [NIV, NLT] “He will not forgive your rebellion.” This threat should stop us in our tracks. If there’s *anything* we’ve come to know about God, it’s that He is kind and forgiving and understanding. If there’s anything that people in our culture assume about God – if they believe in Him at all – it’s that He will accept them. Sure, they know they’re not perfect, but they assume God’s forgiveness is a foregone conclusion. All they have to do to get to heaven is die. Justification by death. Pause and consider, friends, that ***forgiveness from the God of the Bible is NOT a foregone conclusion.*** Notice the logic:

- the warning: “do not rebel against him”
- the reason: “FOR he will not pardon your transgression”
- the reason for the reason: “FOR my name is in him”

Why will He not forgive? Because the holiness of God’s name is at stake. If sin gets pardoned, God’s name is defamed. If He forgives, He Himself would be breaking the Third Commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.” To put it most provocatively, it would be sinful for God to forgive sin.

Forgiveness is, after all, profoundly unjust. Justice delivers exactly what you deserve. Forgiveness releases you from what you deserve. Human judges in Israel were expected to uphold justice in their judgments:

Exodus 23:2-3, 6 ² *You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice,* ³ *nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.* ⁶ ¶ *“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit.*

In April 1992, anarchy erupted in Los Angeles in reaction to the acquittals of 4 officers from the LAPD in the videotaped beating of Rodney King, a motorist who had led officers on a high-speed chase a year earlier. For six days, the city boiled with reaction to a perceived perversion of justice. We expect our judges to render just judgments. Why would we expect any less from our God? Two possible reasons:

- We’ve minimized our sin. “Not that big a deal. Nothing to get all worked up about.” If we heard He was angry, we’d be surprised.
- We’ve presumed upon His grace and patience. Because He’s offered mercy in the past, we assume that’s what we deserve.

ILL: Sproul’s story from *The Holiness of God* – 3 papers due, “F” for being late. 25 of 250 missed the deadline, he was lenient on the first paper. 50 missed the second deadline, he had mercy. No mercy on the last one: F’s all around. When they complained “Not fair” he offered to give justice and give them 3 F’s.

God cannot forgive without besmirching His great name. His own righteousness is at stake. But here’s where it gets tricky, because a few chapters later, Moses argues in precisely the opposite direction: that if God *doesn’t* pardon sin, His name will be defamed:

Exodus 32:11-12 ¹¹ *But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.”* (cf. also Num 14:11-19)

God’s name is His worldwide reputation, His “fame.” And if Moses knows if God crushes Israel, the Egyptians will mock God’s name. If He pardons, it dishonors His name. If He delivers justice, that will dishonor His name. What can He do?

We take a significant step toward the answer when we look more closely at who all is involved in this threat: God (“my name”), Israel (“you, your”), and a third individual: “an angel” (v 20) aka “My angel” (v 23). This so-called “angel” appears or is mentioned 4x in Exodus: in the burning bush (3:2), in the pillar of cloud (14:19), in the promise of the conquest (here in 23:20,23), and after the Golden Calf (32:34,33:2). He also appears various other places in the OT: Gen 16 – Hagar, Gen 22 – Abraham sacrificing Isaac, occasionally in Judges, Psalms, and the prophets. Significantly, he often appears in a context where *the holy God draws near or offers to keep company with sinners*. He is, in this sense, *a merciful accommodation or condescension* of God where, if He were to appear to sinners in all His glory and holiness, He would consume them. So He comes in the form of “the angel of the Lord.” What’s perhaps even more significant is that he completely disappears from the pages of the Bible when we come to the NT. Who is this figure? On the basis of these points, many conclude the angel of the Lord is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus.

And that would make sense in this passage. In fact, this passage demands the presence of Jesus. Only He can resolve this tension between justice and forgiveness.

Romans 3:25-26 *God put [Jesus] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

“So that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith.” There’s the answer. God never forgives sin without punishing someone else. Ever. He can’t. His own name is at stake. Sin requires punishment:

2 Corinthians 5:21 *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Here’s where we begin to see that all these covenant threats point to Jesus. Aren’t you thankful they do?

Galatians 3:10, 13 ¹⁰ *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

Jesus became a curse for us. He became sin. God never forgives sin without punishing someone else. In Jesus, we are forgiven while He is punished. All the covenant threats are fulfilled in Him.

But so are the covenant blessings! Just one example: the land (v 31). Israel never fully possessed these full boundaries. Even under Solomon, their territorial gains fell a bit short of reaching north all the way to the Euphrates River. Why? They never met the conditions, so they never received the promise. And ultimately, their unfaithfulness cost them the land altogether when they were conquered and exiled to Babylon. Remember, this covenant promise is entirely conditional.

You say, “But what about God’s promise to Abraham? That one also involved this land, and it was unconditional.” Yes it was. “So why didn’t Israel ever receive all the land promised to Abraham anyway?” Here’s the answer: ***because Israel’s possession of the Land of Canaan was NOT the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.*** All along the Land of Canaan was meant by God as a symbol of something greater. And Abraham himself understood that!

Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16 ⁸ ¶ *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹³ ¶ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*

Rather than assume God forgot about the land promise or He’s going to get to it later, we should read it more carefully. And with the Great Commission words of Jesus, we have our fulfillment.

Acts 1:6-8 ⁶ *So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

Christ now rules over the whole earth, and He intends for His kingdom to press into every corner. It’s a fulfillment far greater than Israel ever would have anticipated. God was faithful to give them what the land always foreshadowed.

This is a wonderful way of illustrating HOW the gospel works—exceeding our expectations and expanding our vision beyond anything we would have previously thought possible. This is exactly how the OT promises of blessing work in the New Covenant. Ours aren’t “merely” spiritual blessings, as if the OT promises were somehow more real; rather, the NT realities fulfill the OT promises, far surpass them, and still more!

2 Corinthians 1:20 ²⁰ *For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.*

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