

The Book of the Covenant

Good morning church.

It is a joy to be with you again today as we come back to the Book of Exodus for the final portion of our year-long study. Not that today is the final teaching, but it is the beginning of the final and shortest leg of our study. We will conclude our journey in Exodus, 7 weeks from today, on Pentecost Sunday – with the final chapter of Exodus where the glory of God fills the Tabernacle! A perfect Pentecost Sunday text!

But today, we are not yet there.

Today, we come to **Exodus 21-23** – to what is known as **the Book of the Covenant**. Three chapters that essentially show how the 10 Commandments are to get worked out into the everyday, ordinary, communal life of the Israelites.

And let’s be honest: this is the point in the book of Exodus where we tend to give up, or start skimming, or simply skip ahead – in search of more action. We might even be tempted to jump all the way to Joshua – skipping the rest of Exodus and the entirety of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And understandably so.

At least 9 of the next 11 chapters in Exodus are essentially laws and instructions about treatment of servants or slaves, personal injury, protection of property, social responsibility, instructions for justice in court proceedings, and sabbath practice, and keeping the Feasts. Followed by

copious details about the construction and decoration of the Tabernacle, and the priestly garments, the process of consecrating the priests, and bringing sacrifices.

Not the kind of scripture that most of us run to in times of need, or discouragement, or when looking for a word from God for a friend, or a verse to quote in a card.

I don't know if I've ever received a card or email that ended with a verse like **Exodus 21:26**.

“Dear Scott... Just wanted to say thank you for your message yesterday. Signed, Deb Morris. Exodus 21:26.”

And then I'd go look it up and read **these words** – “*An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye.*”

Clearly, this is not the letter to the Philippians – not one of the more quotable and inspirational portions of the Bible.

And yet... [If you know me, you knew it was coming...]

And yet, if we were to wrap up our journey in Exodus at this point, we'd obviously be walking away unfinished. And not just because there are 20 more chapters – but because **the Story of the Exodus isn't over...**

The Story of God's rescuing work in the life of the Israelites is far from complete...

And, just like the Israelites, **we need every ounce of God's rescuing grace, don't we?**

Oh, we may be out of Egypt, but I would dare to say that most of us are not yet **fully alive in the Rescuing Ways of our God!**

We are still **only on our way – from slavery to being alive in the Freedom of God!**

We started this study – back in October – with the acknowledgment that **WE NEED Exodus** – we need to immerse ourselves, as a community, in this formative text, for an extended season – **for many reasons** – but **ONE**, in particular, because, for all of our historical distance to the events of Israel’s exodus from slavery in Egypt, **we still live in a world ravaged by** slavery and oppression, idolatry and injustice.

The cry of the oppressed is not far off!

And this reality is not just something we read or hear about in the news, it’s something we catch sight of **in our own hearts and lives** – slavery and oppression, idolatry and injustice.

We find ourselves *bound up in the suffering of the world...* Our lives somehow *interwoven* with the suffering and oppression of others...

All that to say: **we need God’s rescuing grace as much as anyone, don’t we?**

We need to be rescued from the oppression of idolatry and led into the Freedom of a Liberating God... *A God in whose service is freedom...*

And not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others... *for the sake of the world...*

As our journey in Exodus has taught or reminded us – God’s passion and aim is not simply to rescue Israel from Egypt, but to rescue them – **and all – from the destruction of idolatry** – that they – and we – might come to experience and embody God’s rescuing grace for the world...

That we would become a people – and a community – that is alive in God’s Holy Freedom – and whose freedom means *life for the world...*

O, we are not yet done with Exodus, are we?

The God of Exodus is not yet done with us, is He?

Thank God!

And although we might not realize it, **Exodus 21-23** – the Book of the Covenant – is an **integral** part of God’s rescuing grace.

Even a **beautiful** part of His rescuing grace...

Now we don’t tend to think of the Old Testament law as exciting, much less **beautiful** or **good news** – *hence most of our Bible are not that frayed when it comes to the second half of Exodus, and the whole of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.*

But within the details of the Book of the Covenant, we are invited once again to catch a glimpse of God’s heart and glory – and I’ll be honest, it is **strikingly beautiful.**

And so let me explain right away – that whenever you’re reading or studying portions of the Old Testament law – it is vital to ask **one core question**: not just what is commanded (or what are we supposed to do), but **what does this law say about the Law-Giver?**

What does this commandment reveal about God – about what God cares about and is seeking?

[Honestly, asking this question has single-handed helped me come to love Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy!).

Think with me about the passage I jokingly referenced a moment ago – this *uninspiring* verse in Ex 21.

Exodus 21:26 - “An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye.”

We could read this and nod off with the seemingly irrelevant minutia.

But think about where the Israelites have come from? A life of **punishing & terrifying** slavery in Egypt – where, as history and the Exodus account tells us, slaves were treated as nothing but **economic property** – with **no status, no rights, no protection**. A master could treat his or her slave however they pleased, with no consequences and no guilt...

But not in God’s economy – not in God’s community – not at the hands of God’s liberated people...

No, according to Exodus 21:26 – a slave or servant is a human being of value in themselves beyond their economic productivity – and so they – like anyone – cannot be treated unjustly – with no consequences.

“An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye.”

The dignity and physical well-being of a slave matters so much that this kind of treatment requires their being set free.

Which means, their debt forgiven – the main reason why anyone would be a servant or slave in ancient Israel.

In contrast to other ANE law codes, this command for the slave to be set free is unparalleled.

And notice that this command is exactly the same for **female** slaves, as it is for male slaves.

Again, in contrast to other ANE law codes, the biblical command is unparalleled – it makes **no distinction**.

Ok, so – the deeper question – the crucial question:

What does this law say about the Law-Giver?

What does this command reveal about God?

Well, so much, right?!

First of all, it tells us that God cares **not just** about our worship of Him, but He cares about **our treatment of one another...**

And not only that, but it tells us that God – the God of Exodus, the God of Israel – cares about every human life. That there is no class or status of person that falls **beyond or below God’s attention and care.**

That, according to God, every person – no matter their class or status – deserves **justice...** to be **treated justly...**

And not only that, but it tells us that God – the God of Exodus, the God of Israel – is **the Protector of the vulnerable.**

Whoever and wherever the vulnerable are.

Let it be said: Once again, in Exodus, we encounter a God who truly is

Good News! Glorious Good News!

He is **the Protector of the Vulnerable...**

This is one of things that moves me when I read much of the Old Testament laws – and, specifically, **the Book of the Covenant – Ex 21-23.**

Everywhere you turn in these three chapters, you find a God who not only **notices** the vulnerable – and **cares** for the vulnerable – **but who is actively seeking to protect the vulnerable.**

To form a people who will share and embody God’s passion and commitment to protect the vulnerable...

We don’t have time to read the whole of Exodus 21-23 this morning – I wish we did. I commend it to you – **and I mean that.**

But let’s at least walk through it and catch the breadth of what is said here and what it says about God.

Exodus 21:1 – “These are the laws you are to set before **them**” – the **Israelites**, that is – the people that God has set free.

Following this, our translations break up the Book of the Covenant into **7 parts:**

- The treatment of slaves
- Personal injury
- Protection of property
- Social responsibility
- Laws of Justice and Mercy
- Sabbath Laws
- The Three Annual Festivals

We can't get into all this – but we'll touch on some.

My NIV Bible here presents the first portion under the heading: “Hebrew Servants” (Not all headings are helpful and even right. They are not a part of the biblical text, just editorial helps from the translators or editorial team behind any given translation).

That said, this one is simple and fits.

Exodus 21:1-11 is all about the treatment of slaves or servants – specifically ensuring the protection of the well-being of both male and female slaves; and that no slave is a slave for life, unless they choose this for themselves (possibly for the sake of their own well-being).

At the conclusion of this portion, there is a specific commandment that states that **female servants are not to be set** free in the seventh year, as male servants are. **Which**, to us, sounds horrifically cruel and unjust, until we realize that, as historians **explain, “Freeing her and** sending her out of

the household at the end of six years would very likely force her to enter a life of prostitution." (John Oswalt, 454f) In other words, **releasing her** to fend for herself in the ancient world would be **horribly cruel**, and so God's command is yet again about **protecting** her from harm and **ensuring** she is cared for – through redemption to a family member, or embracing her as a daughter through marriage.

Throughout this opening portion of the Book of the Covenant, we see God seeking to protect the vulnerable – specifically, male & female **slaves**.

No other ancient law codes begin here – but this God does...

Next, the **Book of the Covenant** shifts to outline what is to be done in different instances of **personal injury** – where someone strikes a person with a fatal blow, attacks their father or mother, kidnaps someone – and how it is to be handled differently if it was *unintentional* versus *intentional*.

Listen to **v.14** – “*But if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be **taken from my altar** and put to death.*”

In other words, this is a God who is unwilling to let people **hide behind religion** to get away with injustice.

In the ancient world, **sanctuary** was a familiar concept – but one that both the innocent and the **guilt** could claim. *As long as you got there before they caught you.* But, as one historian explains, “this verse subjects the institution to **a moral criteria.**”

This is a God who cares about and is **committed to justice – for all – including, as these commands reveal, for slaves, for women, and for children** (who all lacked rights in the ancient world).

Here is a God **who protects the vulnerable.**

Exodus 22:1-15 – laws regarding the “Protection of Property” – which again is all about **the protection of the vulnerable.**

Janet and I watched a harrowing Netflix movie last week called “**The Boy who Harnessed the Wind**” – based on a true story of a boy raised in the agrarian and impoverished world of rural Malawi... where survival is almost completely dependent on the harvest and the care of community. And where **theft** of the simplest thing – be it, your tools, or your bike, or an animal, or a bag of rice – can lead to **destitution** – which leads to enslavement or death.

Once again, God’s laws are all about **protecting the vulnerable.**

Exodus 22:16-31 – in my Bible (the NIV) and in many other translations, this portion bears the heading: “Social Responsibility”. The ESV titles it: “Laws about Social Justice”. I find this more helpful, but either way, I think it’s a bit misleading – because, in the light of what we’ve already said, **isn’t all of this about Social Justice and Responsibility?**

In truth, the whole of the Book of the Covenant is about Justice and Mercy **because the God of Exodus is a God of Justice and Mercy – particularly, for the vulnerable!**

And this is actually the portion I love the most because of its messy mix of emphasis on ethics and worship. And in this, how the two are intimately related.

Let me read a portion to us – **Exodus 22:21-27.**

Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

***If you lend money** to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate...”*

What does these laws say about God? He is the protector of the vulnerable – the foreigner, widows and orphans, or the poor...

He is good news for the vulnerable!

And let me linger, once again, on one law that relates to women – because it's easy to misconstrue it and think less of God.

Exodus 22:16-17 – *“If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.”*

Now to us, it seems like a gross injustice that this woman would have to take her seducer as her husband. But this verse is not referring rape. In Deut 22:25-27, God speak to that and the consequences is the most extreme.

But here, in this law, many scholars believe this to be **consensual union, but with no commitment** – which, in the ancient world, would make the woman totally vulnerable to destitution were the man to abandon her.

Once again, this law is intended for her protection as the vulnerable one in the relationship.

Ultimately, this law is intended to take the power **out the man’s hands** – and to make sure her needs are protected – either through the covenant commitment of marriage or the intervention of her father. She cannot be simply exploited and discarded. The man is now responsible for her care, provision and protection.

And this is one of **the principles of the Book of the Covenant** – and one of **the priorities or passions of God**: not just for the protection of the vulnerable and powerless, but that those who have power **would use their power to protect the vulnerable and seek justice for the oppressed...**

That **the Israelites – God’s liberated people** – would use their freedom, and the power that comes with it – **to protect the vulnerable and seek justice for all.**

In worship of their God... in worship of OUR God...

According to the Book of the Covenant, **this is true worship.**

Near the end of this portion, we encounter a simple statement – somewhat different to all the rest – **Exodus 22:31 – “You are to be my holy people.”**

In the flow of the text, it feels like just a passing remark, but **it’s not!** Truth is, it is *at the heart of the whole Book of the Covenant* – and what God is doing in all of it.

Through the law, God is giving us a **VISION** of what holiness looks like and means... of what holiness is all about... In the Law, God is giving us a glimpse of His **Holiness in action** – and what this looks like worked out in the fabric of **our** lives...

And there’s two things about this VISION that we must notice and take to heart...

One – that holiness is not something relegated simply to some sacred or religious aspect of our lives, to particular moments or places, or even random acts of kindness.

No, **holiness is a life.** A purposeful, thoughtful real life aligned to the passions and priorities of God – of Jesus – in all things.

The Book of the Covenant will not allow us to consign holiness merely to acts of **private and personal piety**. No, holiness is lived out **everywhere in everything.**

I love how Philip Ryken **explains it.** He says:

"The Book of the Covenant showed the Israelites how the Law applied to daily life. Regulations about livestock grazing in a field seem mundane.

However, this is where most of us live most of the time—at the level of ordinary existence. Thankfully, God is as interested in this part of our lives as he is in anything else that happens in this world.

The Book of the Covenant is about living for God, not just when we are standing at the foot of the mountain and gazing at his awesome glory, but when our neighbor borrows [our car and wrecks it], when someone is spreading rumors, or when an argument turns into a fistfight. ***In other words, it is about real life.*** (Ryken, 658)

Holiness is a comprehensive, all-inclusive reality.

And second – with this – holiness is, according to the Book of the Covenant – ***dramatically and profoundly horizontal.***

It is all about ***relationships...***

When we imagine a holy person, we so often picture someone in solitude and prayer – talking to God with affection and reverence.

And this is certainly ***a part of*** the life of holiness.

But here, in the Book of the Covenant – as in the person of Jesus – we are invited to grasp that ***true holiness*** – being ***alive in the Holiness of God*** – is primarily lived out ***in our relationships...***

Not as much in the songs we sing, as in how we treat the person singing beside us – or behind us – or in front of us.

And in particular, holiness is about ***how we treat the vulnerable...***

“You are to be my holy people.”

A people who use their freedom and power to protect the vulnerable and seek justice for all.

For the glory of God...

A God who is good news for all...

*O, we are not yet done with Exodus, are we?
The God of Exodus is not yet done with us, is He?
Thank God!*

So, where is God inviting us – you and me – to grow in holiness – to use our freedom and power for the sake of protecting the vulnerable and liberating the oppressed?

Where is the well-being of others impacted by your life – and how might Jesus be inviting you to follow Him for the sake of protecting and liberating another?

Let’s pray – and in this moment, in prayer, I want to invite you to look around your life and notice where those who are vulnerable – where your life intersects with others who are vulnerable...

Hear the invitation of Jesus: “**Come, follow Me.**”

Come follow Me in the way of My Rescuing Grace...

Commissioning new elders:

Will you use your power and influence to help us follow in the Way of Jesus – for the sake of the world – to protect the vulnerable and seek justice for all?

To seek God’s Kingdom and will on earth as it is in heaven – for God’s glory, for the sake of the world and our joy in Him...