

I want to recap where we've been because after The Ten Commandments, we arrive in what's called the theophany, which is when God manifests his presence in a unique way, an audible manifestation, and here we see that. There are lights, thunder, and trumpets, and the mountain is smoking and quaking. Then it says in Exodus 20:20:

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. vv. 20-21

The first thing I love about this text is that Moses says to not be afraid so you can be afraid. Did you catch that? It's interesting, but he's saying, don't be afraid of this God who is fully transcendent. That's all the smoke and all the shaking of mountains. It's indicative of God's transcendence. Yet, at the same time, God is imminent. He is present. He is speaking to a particular people at a particular time at a particular place.

So he says that the reason God is doing this is just this transcendent God, but do not fear because what God wants to instill in you is a reverence of holiness for who God is. It will "Keep you from sinning." We have a very flat understanding of sin. We tend to think of sin just as moral negatives. It is, in fact, that but sin has much more of a rich connotation. It's sin as almost a sense of sickness of the soul. Yes, it is just flat rebellion. We'll see that all over this story, but it also has the sense to avoid sin is to try to find healing.

Hold that narrative in place. God is teaching them what it means to be human. They need their souls healed. They need healing from all that has ailed them. God is offering them this instruction, this way forward.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. "Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed.'" vv. 22-26

I want to get to a few things on here. Out of this theophany, out of this manifestation of God's presence, the first thing God does is give instruction about how to worship. Because worship is the proper response to this God, but it's not just random worship. Notice that God lays the foundation for Israel's relationship with him through two things.

First, he says, "You have seen for yourselves." There's something about the redeeming action of God that it lays the basis of Israel's relationship with God. He'll say this over and over in different areas, "You have seen the work I have done." Now they're not far from crossing the Red Sea, escaping slavery—same generation, same people. Of course, what comes into their mind is that redemptive action. The basis of Israel's relationship with God is God's redeeming action.

But it's not just that they have seen. It goes on in verse 22, "You have seen for yourselves. I have spoken to you from heaven." So first it's the redeeming action of God that lays the foundation of their relationship. But then it's the revealed word of God. Now, the Ten Commandments are also known as the Ten Words of God. Certainly, he's referencing that. He's saying, "I have revealed my word to you in such a way where you are a different and unique people. You will have encountered and experienced me different than any nation, different than any people could possibly experience." It's the redeeming action and the revealing word of God that is the fundamental basis on which they worship God.

That makes a little bit more sense as to why he says to not make fancy altars. They didn't need that. They could just make one out of the earth, because the basis isn't a holy place or a holy object. The basis is the redemptive action of God and the revealed word of God.

Then we arrive at that pesky verse 26 that you've been wondering about. "And do not go up on the altar on steps or your private parts may be exposed." Most scholars think God is differentiating the worship of Yahweh from the worship of pagan worship ceremonies. This was before undergarments were around, and so the priests would often just wear a large robe, and it was quite a logistical thing. If you go up too high in a robe, you're going to be exposed.

The concern was that when that would take place, the practice from the onlooker would get confused with the pagan worship that often had sex rituals. They didn't want any accidental nakedness of the priest over the worship of Yahweh to be confused

with pagan worship. Later in the story of Israel, the priestly undergarments would be created to avoid this. Then, it didn't matter if you were up higher.

There's something in this where Yahweh is trying to differentiate and say the worship of God is different and distinct apart from the worship of all other gods. This worship is different. He invites the people into worship because it is the first and most basic response to any believer.

"These are the laws you are to set before them..." (v. 21:1). Then we get to Exodus 21:1, right after the instructions to worship. God now says these are the laws that you are to set before them. What starts here in Exodus 20:22 and extends all the way to the end of chapter 23 is what is known as the Book of the Covenant, sometimes called the Covenant Code.

One commentator said, "Like the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant has to be seen in its redemptive context as a gift of God to people who are already redeemed." Part of the Book of the Covenant is the logistics of what the relationship would be like between God and his people.

It's important that we catch the difference between a covenant and a contract because we live in a contractual culture where we have lost all understanding of covenant. A contract is a legal agreement between parties that specifies mutual obligation. If one party fails to uphold their end, the contract can be void. Contracts are conditional. They're generally based on mutual benefit and driven by self-interest.

Consider the contract I have with AT&T. Years ago, we entered into a contract in which I agreed I would pay x amount per month, and in return, they would provide phone service. There's all sorts of more legal jargon around the contract, but at its essence is, I pay them money, and they provide a service. This is a contract, and if at any point either side of that contract fails to live up to their end, probably after a lot of lawsuits or whatnot, then that contract can be void and the obligations dismissed.

What God was stepping into with the people of God was not a contract. It was a covenant. Let me give you a different scenario from 15-plus years ago. Lindsay and I gathered with families and friends and a pastor and in that moment, the pastor looked at me and said, "Do you take Lindsay to be your wife, to have and hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poor in sickness and in health to love and to cherish for as long as you both shall live?" Of course, I responded with, "I do." This is a covenant.

A covenant is different. A covenant is trying to constitute an unconditional environment in which for richer, for poor, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish for as long as we both shall live, that is the confines of our relationship that was presented before God. When I'm standing in the AT&T office, I do not say, "AT&T, I promise to have and to hold from this day forward in

payment and lack of payment in good signal and lack of signal for richer for poor for as long as we both shall live." That doesn't make sense in that context because it's contractual. A covenant is not based on a contract or obligation.

A covenant is built out of relationality. It's not based on regulations, but rather, it's saying that whatever may come our way, we vow to love each other. In some ways, this is what's taking place at the foot of Mount Sinai. We are experiencing a wedding ceremony in which God is coming before his people and saying, "I promise to have and to hold for richer, for poor and sickness and health till death do us part."

The people of God are going to respond in the way that most of us do on our wedding day. They'll say, "I do. I promise to do everything God asks of us." But if you're human and have been in any relationship, you'll recognize that the unconditionality of covenant is what we need to lean on because I certainly, in those 15 years, have failed to live up to that vow. Yet that vow sustains it.

Within that context, I want you to think through the law. Think through these commandments that are given. The commandments aren't to establish the relationship, but rather, they are the ways in which you work out how the relationship will go. Lindsay and I, when we got married, divided two of the most menial tasks, the ones that everyone hates—laundry and dishes. For 15 years, I've taken the lead on dishes. For those 15 years, Lindsay's taken the lead on laundry. Of course, sometimes I don't, but yet it doesn't void the covenant because the covenant is something different. In the same way, these laws that we're about to read are trying to institute how the relationship between God and the people will work.

Holiness

There are two focuses on the covenant or the law that God gives to his people that he's trying to instill within them. The first focus of the covenant is that God is calling them to holiness. Holiness has a bad rap. We tend to import the word purity on top of it, and that's not all the way wrong, but rather holiness at its core means to be set apart and distinct. That's why we have songs that we sing that say "You are holy, holy." It's saying that God is set apart and different from any other being. That's why the angels are crying out holy, holy, holy.

For the people of God, he is saying, within this context of the law, is that they are to be a holy people. They are to be different than all the other people in the world because they are God's chosen people. So, the first focus of the law is this idea of holiness.

Now, as we read from the perspective of the New Testament, we can see the way this became legalistic very fast with all sorts of false understandings of righteousness. They tried to achieve holiness and right standing with God based on this, but that's not what's going on here at all. It was an attempt for them to

be a different people, a symbol of the priesthood of believers. A people that, as other people look at them, could see what God was like through the way the people of Israel acted.

Justice

The second is justice. Throughout the text, there's a vision of justice in which God says you will be different and holy, but you will also live according to a design for a people in which justice is at the core, particularly or exclusively God's vision of justice.

It's this that begins this dual form of holiness and justice that you see holds the laws together. You'll get into all sorts of crazy laws, which may be hard to make sense of. My invitation for you is to try to hold that understanding that there's something in here about who God is and who his people are that's holding together holiness and justice. With all of that in mind, let's jump into the first section of these laws in Exodus 21.

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free. Exodus 21:2-4

Right out of the gate, we've got a few troubling references. This is one of the sections in which people read, and it confirms their belief that the scriptures are outdated. I can understand that because we're reading it at a particular time in a particular place. So, let's unfold this a little bit further. The first thing we need to understand is the law that God is giving.

We have to understand the genre because it makes an important distinction on what's being laid out for the people of God. The genre of this is casuistic law, better known in the modern world as case law. Casuistic law is a "if then" scenario. It's a way in which you extrapolate from moral principles and impose them into a particular scenario that may not be fully dealt with in the original moral law or principle. It tends to be set up with "if then." They're not dealing in ideal scenarios but rather adapting to situations that may arise. Dr. Carmen Imes says this about genre:

These are casuistic laws "if...then"). They are not presenting God's ideal, they are given to help regulate non-ideal situations. The goal of these laws is to protect the vulnerable from exploitation by the powerful. Dr. Carmen Imes

A common misreading of this text is because God makes seemingly accommodations for something like slavery or servitude, God must be okay with it. But that would be a false reading. That's a thin reading of the text. Think of it in the ways that I would talk to my children when they were young. If you touch that stove, you will likely burn yourself, and therefore, I will ground you.

The goal there is not me saying you should just place your hands all over that stove. The goal is different. It's a non-ideal scenario. If you do this, you will be burnt and there'll probably be repercussions so that you can learn not to touch the thing. So here, in this case law, what we're finding is that God is saying that if you buy a Hebrew servant, we'll get to all that in a second and why that scenario would even pop up. But here's how to handle that scenario in a way that is just and distinct and different from all the other nations.

Let's talk about a few different terms before we dig into why this is a life-giving law, even though we don't see it in our modern minds. The first is the word servant, or your translation might say slave. Neither of those are great translations, but people smarter than me have found there's not a whole lot of other options. The Hebrew word is the word *eved*, which can mean servant or slave. I prefer worker or employee. I think that's truer to what is happening in the text. I believe the intent of the word *eved* would be that of a contracted servant. That is helpful when we understand the next word.

The second word, when it talks about to acquire or buy is the word *kana*, which has this essence of a financial exchange. It does, in fact, speak of buying and exchanging financial scenarios here for the *eved*, but let's play this out a little bit more. If finances are exchanged, that implies there is a contract. The fact is that purchasing a servant is different than the antebellum slavery that took place in our country and the forced slave trade that took place there or modern human trafficking. The fact that financial exchange exists, differentiates it from where our mind goes when we hear the word slave on this side of the antebellum self. So there's a distinction and a difference here.

It's likely that what's going on here is there was a debt or a destitute poverty at play in which the one being "purchased" had to outsource. They had nothing left to pay the debt that was due to them. So therefore, they said, "I will work for you and work off that debt." Think of the kitschy scenario in which someone who skips out on the dinner bill or can't pay for it has to wash dishes to pay off the bill. It's more akin to that.

I don't want to make light of what's being spoken of here, but it's more akin to a contracted worker paying off a debt, with the only other possibility to starve to death. So they had no other options.

Another phrase that's used here is that of an indentured servant, which might be helpful as well. One other modern analogy that might help us when we think through this acquisition is to think of the way, at least in the football world, the soccer world, in which a football club would purchase the contract of a player. They are not the property of that football club, but rather, they have exclusive rights to that player. This is the analogy that best explains what's going on here.

The owner of a field of significant means is now saying you are indebted. You have something to pay off. Therefore, let's work out a contract in which you can work that debt off. With that in mind, think about the stipulations that will come through this because what God does is say that if you find yourself in this scenario, here's how to do it and resist exploitation.

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free without paying anything" (v. 2). The first stipulation under this law is set up to protect the servant, regardless of how big the debt is, regardless of how slow the debt's being paid off, after six years, whatever remained is forgiven. That servant is to be released and set free without payment. The whole design is set up to protect the servant. To protect a generational slavery that could take place through this. It's really at its core, what later into the law would be called the sabbatical principle, is the idea that you work six years, and the seventh year you take a sabbatical, you take a year off.

That principle filters down throughout the law in so many different ways. Here you see that. The slavery and indentured servitude among the Hebrews were never intended to be a permanent condition but a voluntary temporary refuge for people suffering what would otherwise be desperate poverty. Within the brokenness of this scenario, God is working to protect the vulnerable and attempting to temper the sin that's at the core of who we are.

With that narrative in mind, is it any surprise that the very first laws God gives to the people who were enslaved for 400 years are about slavery? Does it not make sense that for 400 years, they had been oppressed in generational forced slavery, a very different scenario than what we see here, and yet God understands the human heart enough to know that we will be tempted to perpetuate that which we experienced?

Now that they had their autonomy, God was preventing them from committing the same atrocities that they experienced because he recognizes the human heart for redemptive for the myth of redemptive violence—what was done to us, we do to them. God is trying to create a different, holy, and just people. It begins right beneath the surface here.

But let's go on. There are more stipulations. "If he comes alone, he has to go free alone." Remember, the assumption is he's carrying a debt. So, the owner is buying that debt. If he comes alone with that debt, then he's free to go alone at the end of those six years, but if he has a wife, when he comes, she is to go with him.

So, if he comes with a whole family, the whole family is under the obligations of that particular contract. *"If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master and only the man shall go free" (v. 4).*

In this scenario, the assumption is that now this woman who was in the mix somewhere had also been carrying a debt because she

was with this servant. Maybe this woman came after the man got there and when that marriage takes place, the woman is still in debt. If she came two years after the man, she can't just marry him and then knock off two years of her debt. She still has to pay the six years and then be freed on the seventh.

The way she's carrying this and saying that there's still some semblance of justice on both ends of this that has to take place. It's hard for us because this language seems very crass to our modern ears, but I believe that God is working within a broken system and trying to find a way in which life and justice can take place.

"But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life. vv. 5-6

There are all sorts of stuff here we're not going to get into, but the basic tenant is if the scenario is so good, remember the man came with a debt and or had no other options to make money or to exist. He comes into this scenario, and he likes this master, who was very gracious and led with love and grace. The man likes this scenario. The autonomy and the agency is given to the servant to choose to stick around. Then they go to a judge, which provides the out for the master. Maybe the servant wasn't that great. Maybe the services rendered weren't really up to snuff. So, it gives an out for the owner and for the servant in which they can mutually come together and state that things have worked out pretty well, and they both want to continue on in this arrangement.

It flips the whole understanding in which the ownership in the agency is given to the vulnerable, not to the powerful. The master isn't given the right to force the man to stick around forever. It's quite the opposite. The servant can take a liking to this scenario and, therefore, enter into a long-term situation.

"If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money. vv. 7-11

It gets more complicated here, but hold this whole thing in line that God is working within this casuistry or case law to offer a way forward in the midst of a broken scenario. Now, it shifts. While the first law focused on an indentured or servant man, it now flips to a female servant. We get this line. "If a man sells his

daughter as a servant." Now, it's complicated. What we have to remember is that nearly 100 percent of marriages in the ancient world were arranged marriages, a practice that has fallen out of favor in most modern cultures. It's one in which there's this arrangement ahead of time.

Most scholars believe what is happening here is the practice of both a dowry and a bride price. The husband's family, when this arranged marriage was to take place, would receive a dowry. It was a lump of money or wealth that would go with the bride to the husband's family to help secure her if the relationship goes sour. There's something there because, in this scenario, the woman's coming in to serve on the land or whatever it is. So there's something there, if that falls through, to protect the "investment" in the relationship.

On the flip side of that, the opposite would take place with a bride price in which the husband's family would pay a bride price to the wife's family for the inverse. But for the same reason that if the marriage falls apart, the bride has an amount of money and wealth to help her social security. If the marriage were to fall apart, divorce was quite precarious for women. They had no way to earn a living. So this bride price that came over is the social net in which this woman would have something to exist and wouldn't be left to destitute poverty.

So something in this exchange that's taking place here in verse 7 that if a man sells his daughter as a servant, she's not to go free as the male servants do. Well, what does that mean? Why can't she go free as the male servants do? Think about the scenario. If, in fact, a marriage takes place, it's the same thing that was listed before. If a marriage happens at the end of six years, the relationship still exists. So you can't just dump her out because the relationship now carries on beyond six years. The marriage will endure beyond that. So it says in verse 8 that if she doesn't work out, he must let her be redeemed.

The idea of redemption means, if it goes sour, she's not to be left alone to her own devices, but redeemed back to her family of origin. The divorced woman isn't supposed to just be left out on her own to fend for herself, but she should have the opportunity to return to her family of origin so that she is protected and finds the necessities of life.

Then it goes on to say he has no right to sell her to foreigners because he has broken faith with her. Here's the most clear and obvious commandment against human trafficking in the scriptures. If this woman wasn't up to snuff for whatever reason for this master, he is not allowed to sell her to anyone. It's a prohibition against the sex slavery in the ancient world in which God looks at the man that was with power in that culture and says that they are not allowed to sell her off and take the money and run. They have a responsibility here.

Next, if he selects her for his son, if he sets up this arranged marriage for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. This means it's moved from an indentured servant into that of a daughter-in-law. They aren't to think of her less than, but rather, they must bestow on her the very rights of a daughter.

If the son marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing, and marital rights. The son may marry somebody else, and now you've got multiple wives. But the son isn't allowed to look at the first wife as a second-class citizen but rather must continue to bestow to her food, clothing, and all the marital rights that come with it.

The verse is a little more radical than it hits our ears that if he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free without any payment of money. This last line says that if the woman, for whatever reason, is deprived of food, clothing, or marital rights, she has the right to just up and leave and go back to her family of origin at no cost. The debt is forgiven.

You see how liberating that is for the woman. The agency in the power structure is completely flipped. The ancient world was built on a patriarchal society in which men controlled all of the power. Yet here God is saying, "Woman, if you are not treated the way you should be, you can up and leave." It's a beautiful, liberating picture. It's buried against all of our assumptions of how this text would operate.

There's an old adage in hermeneutics that God spoke to Moses in Moses' day and in Moses' way. Meaning whenever God intercedes and speaks into human history, he is, in fact, bound by the time in which he speaks. The question is, naturally, why didn't he just come in and abolish slavery? The problem is the entire economic system of the ancient world was built on that form. So to come in and pull the rug out from under that would have just been utter chaos and collapse. Instead, God plants seeds for the systemic overthrow of this injustice. He begins it in Genesis and traces it all the way through Revelation. There's a book by William Webb if you're interested in this particular topic.

What you see, particularly on the topic of slavery, is God planting seeds for the overthrow of slavery so that when we get to the New Testament, you have something in Galatians in which Paul says, there is neither, in Christ, slave nor free. It's upsetting the whole thing. Even here, he is upsetting the structures of the status quo, saying, "My people will be different." There's an ever-growing trajectory of the way God understands humans and the act of slavery, which he is undoing slowly over time.

Macaulay, in his book, *Reading While Black*, says this, "The Old Testament and later the New Testament create an imaginative world in which slavery becomes more and more untenable." Over time, God is unraveling the broken systems and structures of this world.

God's Heart for Transformation

The law reveals God's heart for transformation. I believe what God's doing here in a seemingly difficult text for us is to say that this people will not be like the people of old because that's not how things are done. These early laws are God's heart. It reveals that he desires the radical transformation of his people.

The first Exodus was about getting the Israelites out of Egypt. The second is about getting Egypt out of the Israelites. God wants the total radical transformation of who these people are so they can demonstrate and embody an entirely different way than the world had seen.

The main issue, at least at the beginning, is this concept of how you view the other human. Think of this in Exodus 23:9; a little bit later in the story where God says, *"Do not oppress a foreigner. You yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt."* There's an acute propensity in the human condition to perpetuate the very atrocities that we experienced. History is riddled with stories of freed people becoming the ones who end up enslaving others. God's heart is for that radical transformation where we do not continue that.

God's Heart for the Vulnerable

Secondly, the law reveals God's heart for the vulnerable. I've done my best to demonstrate that in this text, but I think it is so clear. What God is doing here is working within the brokenness of a structure and a system within the world and yet advocating for the vulnerable. His heart throughout the Old Testament, and from this point forward, you see this in his relation with Israel, is bent towards the impoverished and the enslaved and the vulnerable in such a way that his consistent concern is for the marginalized. He is constantly working within the poor, the widow and the orphan and all those in need to create a people who would care for them in the same way God cares for them.

In the Old Testament, God's command to his people is to care for the vulnerable by establishing laws like these that we just read. The prophets would continually rail against the people of God when they overlooked and dismissed these laws. The prophets were constantly calling Israel back to the call for justice for the oppressed.

God's heart is no more clearly viewed than through the life of Jesus, who not only cared for the oppressed and the marginalized but became that which he sought and loved through the cross. You see this most obviously in Philippians 2, in which it says that Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but rather poured his divinity out and became humble to bring about our salvation.

The very life, existence, and work of Jesus Christ that we'll celebrate in communion is about God's heart for the vulnerable. Because while we may not necessarily fall into that category of the impoverished and the poor and the widow or the orphan, the fact is, we all are vulnerable. We recognize the brokenness of our own scenario, just like the people of Israel here, in which we cannot earn God's love.

Yet we stumble along, enslaved to brokenness and sin. We, too, need a savior. Over and over, God says to remember at the very beginning of this, you yourselves have seen what I have done for you. The redemptive action of God for Israel and for you and me is through his death and resurrection. We are offered the forgiveness of sins and a way forward in which we, too, find the healing for our souls that we so long for.

God often was retelling the story of Exodus to his people to say, "Don't forget who you are and don't forget the story in which I'm writing within you." So, in communion, we come to the table and enter that story. We remember that God has done a work in us that we could not do on our own.

Jesus, in that upper room, hours before he'd be arrested and taken to the cross, finds himself with his disciples in one last meal. What does he do but tell the story of Exodus. He takes the Passover meal and reminds his people of all that God had done for them and for us. We take communion and remember this once a month. You hear these words spoken over you because it's important that we continue to hear them. We're a forgetful people. You'll see that in Israel, too.

When we take communion, we hear these words: the body of Christ was broken for you, and the blood of Christ was poured out for you because this is the new covenant in his blood. Jesus came to overturn the old covenant and offer a different way. In the past, there were all these rituals and sacrifices and ways in which God knew we'd break the law. So, within the law, he created ways for us to rectify that, but ultimately, it was pointing to Jesus and his work on the cross.

He was that ultimate sacrifice that would bring that freedom. So it's at communion that we named that. We say, "Jesus, it is not because of what we have done, it is not because of any of our own actions, but rather it is through your body broken for us, your blood poured out for us, that we experienced the love and life that you've given to us." We recognize at this moment that Jesus' death, life, and resurrection offered a new way. It is only through Jesus that we find the forgiveness and the healing of our souls.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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