

I love this series in Exodus. Their story is our story. Looking at Exodus 22 and reading all these commands, I felt like there were too many commands. I didn't even know where to land. I didn't know where to go with this. Then I realized I needed to take a step back and figure out what God is doing with all of these commands. It dawned on me that what was happening was the Israelites had just finished 400 years of being oppressed by the Egyptians. So now they're beginning their freedom as a new group of people. They're being formed into a brand new nation.

God needs to bring them over to Mount Sinai and give them these laws because he's forming a new group of people. Yes, they have gotten out of Egypt, they were no longer in slavery, but the ways of Egypt were still in them. They were out of Egypt, but Egypt was not out of them. So God took them to a desert place and rewired the deeply rooted patterns in their life. He taught them his ways, taught them how to act and behave in a way that would reflect him to other nations.

He is a God of a certain type of way. He has certain types of characteristics. He likes certain types of things. Some things anger him. He wanted them to learn his ways. He wanted to rewire their deeply rooted patterns so they could learn his ways and be a reflection of God in the world. That's what's happening with all of these commands. It's not just a bunch of rules that God is teaching them. What he's doing is teaching them the character in his heart. As a newborn child that's being formed, so was this nation. It's a similar process that we go through when we're born again in Christ.

Some of you are just exploring your faith. I'll make a passionate plea that following Jesus is the best decision you can ever make in your life. I'm telling you. Go ahead, search everywhere else. I've tried other gods. I've tried other things. You're going to pretty much land on the fact that the Christian worldview is the best worldview. That this man named Jesus is the only one worth following. I'm telling you that. I want to honor your seeking. I'm just going to implore you, though, to seek a little faster. We don't have a lot of time left.

The way God formed this brand new nation is by teaching them, and then testing them, and transforming them. Similarly, when we become born again in Christ, we may have all kinds of weird patterns that we learned from our family of origin, culture, and society, and God is doing a similar process. So what's happening with Israel, happens with us. God doesn't change very much. He has to take us to a place, almost take everything out of our life,

what we call the proverbial desert, and he says, "I have to rewire your deeply rooted patterns, and I want to teach you, test you, and transform you."

That's what's happening. God mirrors the same process for us, as with them. So you may be thinking, what in the world do the commands of Exodus 22 and 23 have to do with me? I'm an entrepreneur. I am a parent. I'm a stay-at-home mother. I am a young adult. I live in the Bay Area in 2024. These commands are archaic. They have nothing to do with me.

What would you think if I told you that the laws in Exodus 22 through 23 had everything to do with our lives right now? What if they are a part of how God is actively shaping and forming us today? Would you want to find out how part of the goal is to do that? Because reading Exodus is kind of like this. Let's say you are invited to a soiree where there's art, and you're just walking around, not really into the paintings and arts and all, but you're there and in this dimly lit room. You see this piece of art all the way on the other side of the room, and, wow, it is ugly. Then you walk over a little closer because it's kind of dim. It's getting uglier as you walk closer, until you're standing a foot away from it only to find out that it is a mirror.

That's what it's like when we read Exodus. We look at these people and say, "What is wrong with you?" God delivered you. He took your enemies out, and then you worshipped a golden calf. Then we realize that Exodus is a mirror of our own soul. God has done so much for us, and we're so quick to forget, move on to something else, and worship something else. That's what it's like.

That's why I love Exodus. Their story is our story. We look at these commands, and they are so archaic. "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." It's 2024. I guess God loves hotpot. You can't convince me otherwise. God's really into food, folks, and he likes his hotpot a certain way—coconut milk, not goat's milk. That's a joke! The truth is, these commands do more, and we'll dive into that. Their story is our story because here's the deal: God's ultimate goal for our lives is the exact same goal for all of us.

Our careers may look different, our family of origin may look different, and our values may differ to some degree. But I would say that God's goal for us is exactly the same. God's ultimate goal is to conform us to the image of his Son, Jesus. That's what this whole book, the Bible, is about.

Romans 8:29. God wants to conform every one of us to the image of his Son. So he's actively molding us and shaping us and using secondary means like circumstances and obstacles and what we would consider mountains or valleys that are in our way. God is like, "No, it's me doing an active work in your life to shape and mold you because my ultimate goal is for you to look like Christ."

If God wants to conform us to look like his Son, and we currently are not there, how do we get from here to there? How do we do it? Well, I believe there is actually a process of formation. We don't have time to take a comprehensive look at it, but for the sake of this scripture, we'll use a simple framework. Here's the framework. God's ultimate goal is to conform us to look like Jesus. So how does he do that? Part of that formation is God teaching us, testing us, and then ultimately transforming us.

God teaches us.

First of all, he's teaching us through his people, the Israelites. He's using them as an example. Their story is our story. Second, he teaches us through commands. Really it's his character, and who he is tests us. This is where theology meets praxis. This is where beliefs actually filter down into our behaviors. This is basically where faith meets action because following God is not theoretical. It's not metaphorical. We don't follow God in a vacuum where it's just like, "Oh yeah, my beliefs are here, but I live however I want to live."

If you're a true follower of God, he will test your faith. Not because he's bored, not because he's a bully in heaven. It's not because he doesn't have anything else to do, so he's just going to mess with our lives. It's because when we work out our faith and our beliefs through actions, that's when we truly grow. That's the embodiment of our faith.

God Tests Our Faith.

Just as I teach my children things in theory, in order for those truths that I'm teaching to take root, I have to give them opportunities to try those theories. Theology has to meet praxis. So this is where God tests our faith. Then, ultimately, God transforms us. God provides a path for our transformation. All roads lead to Jesus. Jesus is the one who will introduce us to a new and better way to live. One that is not rooted in commands—follow these commands, you get blessed; don't follow them, you get cursed. That was the old agreement that humanity had with God. There's a new agreement, one of truth and grace.

So let's take a look at this portion of scripture, using this framework that God teaches, tests, and transforms.

God transforms us.

Transformation, first and foremost, starts with the right belief. For any real transformation to take place, it first has to start with beliefs. Now, in order for you to believe, if you reverse engineer Romans 10, the Bible says anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, but how can they call on him if they've never

heard about him? How can they hear about him unless someone goes out and preaches?

The bottom line is that for us to have a real transformation, we have to believe. But first, you have to hear the truth, then you have to understand the truth, and then, at some point, you have to accept that truth and believe in it. The moment you start to believe in it, that's when the rubber meets the road, and theology has to meet praxis, and you'll be tested.

Now, this is why when God transforms, he first and foremost wants to teach his children. Teaching is a huge part of what God does. But what is God ultimately trying to teach? I would say the number one thing God wants to teach his people in the Book of Exodus 22 and 23, and in our lives right now is who he is.

I believe if we know who God is, then the commands make sense. If we know who he is, then the things that are happening in our lives that we can't wrap our brain around, humanly speaking, we start to realize that we know who God is. I understand who he is, what his character is, and what his heart is like. Now I can make sense of my life. God is teaching his people who he is in four main categories: his mercy and compassion, his reverence and devotion, his integrity and justice, and his trust in worship. Each command reveals a part of who God's character is. What his heart is like.

God is revealing himself to his people. He's leading them. They had never been led by God before. They were in Egyptian oppression, and now they're being led by divine providence. They're being led by this divine God, and he has to introduce himself to them. He does it through the commands to show who he is. These are his core values. He is merciful. He wants you to show mercy. He is compassionate. He wants you to show compassion. He is holy. So there are certain things he is going to restrict us from. He is the truth. Show integrity. He is just. We have to show justice. It's God introducing himself.

God is teaching his people who he is at the end of the day. It's not just about believing truth. It's about living it out. It's about obedience. We can know about God. We can have true beliefs about God. We can believe the truth about God, but if it doesn't filter down into our obedience, there's no difference between us and demons. The Bible says that even demons acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

They actually believe in Jesus more than we do because they've seen him, they know he is real. They know the truth. When Jesus walked around and did ministry, demons would often shout out, "Son of God." They would acknowledge the truth about Jesus. But did they live it? Did they surrender themselves to him? Did they bow their knee in worship? No.

Knowing about God, being taught by God, who he is, that's important. You can come here every Sunday morning and receive an incredible message from a pastor. You can receive the greatest

truth from scripture, but if you go out here and never live it, then it makes no difference.

Faith and action have to go hand in hand. It is not enough to know about God cerebrally. You have to know him through your life. So God wants to do more than teach his people. He wants to test them. This is where the rubber meets the road. My son right now is actually getting his permit in two weeks, and he is an overthinker. He's my second-born son, and he is super smart, super logical, has a great pulse on reality, and can nail the permit test. He knows everything.

So I finally threw him behind the wheel. Put him in our suburban. I believe in teaching kids to drive big cars right away. You may wonder why. It's because he can be a free driver for Mobilized Love! So he knows everything about the permit test, but I put him behind the wheel. He was the worst driver I had ever seen. The guy could not do it because there's a difference between acting and believing in God.

Here's what God is doing in Exodus 22 and 23. God often tests our obedience in areas where we struggle most to surrender or give up control. This is what God is going after in Exodus 22 and 23. He sees a brand new nation being formed. He starts to see these recurring themes in theirs and in our lives. There are some serious areas where we might be having a hard time surrendering and giving up control.

He gives them some commands to test them in these areas. God tests us in the areas we have a hard time giving up. And this is where it starts to make sense in our life. How do these commands make sense for us here in 2024? God is so smart. Not only was he forming his people then, he's also forming his people now, using these same commands. Because in each of these commands, there is an underlying issue that God is addressing. He wants to address those issues in our own hearts today. I call it, the thing under the thing, or the underlying issue, or the heart of the issue.

The heart of the issue, by the way, is always going to be an issue of the heart. So God, knowing our natural tendencies as humans, knows our hearts are prone to wander. He knows our flesh has a tendency to rear its ugly head, because we are by nature not good. This is the difference between a Christian worldview and the world's view because the world will tell us to look within. Please don't. It's dark and depressing.

Don't look within, look to Jesus. The clearer you see him, the more you can look within, and it'll start to make sense. But God knows that by nature, we're not actually that great. In fact, the Bible says that by nature, we're objects of wrath. So God knows that our natural tendency is to steer away from him. So he gives these commands as a litmus test for our hearts. He wants to address the underlying issue.

I want to look at a couple of these commands and show how they relate to us today. We're not going to go through all of them, but for example, here's a command that's very timely. *"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt"* (Exodus 22:21). You may say that we shouldn't get political here. I'm a guest preacher. So I can say pretty much anything I'd like because the truck's already funded. No, I'm joking. Politics, for me, is not worth losing friendships over. The gospel is way more important than a lot of politics because if politics could do a ton, Jesus would have been a politician, but he wasn't.

So here's the deal. My parents are immigrants. My dad immigrated from Taiwan. My mom immigrated from France. They landed in San Francisco in the seventies during the hippie movement. They met each other partying. They had a family and then found Jesus. So, we don't come from a long lineage of Christians. I grew up with my mom experiencing basically socialism and my dad experiencing communism, which is why they love America so much.

My dad, if you look at him, he is a straight-up Asian dude, but he thinks he's a caucasian male. What I want to say about this issue is that I believe in law and order. I believe in doing things right. In fact, I don't believe people should do whatever they want. That's not compassion. That's not dignifying to just let people do whatever. You are basically saying that you're not worth rules. So, I believe in order but forget what I believe. Let's go to scripture.

"Don't mistreat or oppress a foreigner," period. I believe it's about tone. We're not getting political; all I'm saying is that as followers of God, we have to treat foreigners with dignity and remember our own need for God's grace. Because we have a tendency to forget that God brought us into a family. We have a tendency to forget that we were foreigners in Christ's family, and he brought us in. So, we need to take a look at our own hearts.

Remember, God has shown us so much grace. We must extend that grace to others. It's about our tone, is what it boils down to. It's about our heart. It's the underlying issue. The heart of the issue that God is addressing is our apathy or arrogance: "We're already in this country; if you didn't get here the right way, you have to get out." That is so arrogant. We have to have empathy and humility. Yes, let's do things the right way, but let's also do things God's way. Do it with love. So that's what it boils down to for me. We have to do things the right way, but we can do it with love.

Here is the deal: I don't expect politicians to do it because not every politician follows the Bible. But I believe the church should lead the way with compassion, empathy, and humility. We can't afford, as Christ followers, to have arrogance. We can't. That's just one command where God says to be like him.

Another one, I'll just give an example where he says in verse 25, *"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" (v. 25). We're called to prioritize what God is addressing here. When he says that if a needy person takes a loan, don't charge interest on them, some of you may be taken aback and say that the bottom line is the bottom line. You may feel you have to make revenue from this. God says this is who he is. For needy people, don't charge them interest.

Here God is saying that he wants to address the heart issue we have, which is greed. You should not be a greedy person. Now, you could charge interest to rich people. That's fine. But for a needy person, you must show them grace and compassion. You must lend without expecting anything back. No profit. Of course, you can get the money back, but don't try to profit off of poor people. What God is ultimately addressing is the heart of the issue, which is greed.

He wants us to develop generosity. The ability to give and expect nothing in return. So, I loved that CPC funded this ministry. You didn't say, "I want to see this at this time." I want to see this at this time because we are a needy non-profit, and you didn't expect anything in return. You just said, "We're going to gift you this, and we believe it's going to happen." And it happened.

I'll just do a couple more because those commands are about others, but they are also about our own hearts. This next command will directly impact your life today. How about the command where God says to give the first fruits and your firstborns to God. Here's the test. God is testing our faith in this area. We're called to honor God with our best and prioritize him above all else.

Giving the first fruits to God means that we don't delay in our giving. Because here's the deal about delay. If we delay our duty to give to God, we know we might not give at all. It's the truth. When the Holy Spirit moves on our hearts, we should give that check right now. You can talk yourself out of it and say you'll do it later. Then Monday comes around, and you get busy, and Tuesday comes around, and you forget. God is going to supply for his people, but you missed out on the blessing.

We know when we delay our duty, we skip the opportunity. The enemy tempts us, and he says, "You know what? Another opportunity will show up later." Church, we can't delay offering God the first fruits of our time, our strength, and our money. For the young adults in the room, you may think, "Well, I feel compelled to serve God. But my parents tell me to do this, and culture tells me to do that, but I kind of want to do something radical for God."

I'm the voice in your ears saying that if you don't do it now, it gets harder later. You'll never have as much time as you have now as a young person. Later comes bills, and then comes responsibilities, and then you meet that person, that significant other, and start a family and have children. If you don't give the first fruits of your

energy, time, wisdom, and money to God now, there will be a temptation to just not do it at all.

So the heart of the issue with this command, when God said, "I want your first fruit," is not that God has need. God has no need. It's that he sees our hearts. God is addressing our procrastination and entitlement issues.

When we are in need, we get on our knees and say, "God, if you help this business deal go through, I'll give to you." He says, "All right, I'm going to test you." It goes through, and we delay and procrastinate. Ultimately, we say, "Well, it was my hard work that got that deal done." It's entitlement. You almost have to keep your own heart in check by giving it right away. God's addressing your heart to have the right priorities and to practice contentment.

When my wife and I got married, I was making \$800.00 a month primarily because I was working for my dad. As a youth pastor in the Tenderloin, that's all he paid me. My wife comes from a very affluent family. They were all concerned. I had no career path, and they were concerned that I didn't even make enough money to pay rent or anything. But I was so in love and a talker. So I just kept saying, "Don't worry, babe. Don't listen to the haters. We're going to figure this thing out."

Back then, we were so content on Friday night with Osha Thai noodles and two dishes, and we're great. But as life goes on and you make a little bit more money and have four kids, I'm not even content with that same restaurant. It's kind of dirty. Let's go find something else. Our hearts naturally want more. Our soul is insatiable. It'll never be satisfied. So when God says to give him the first fruit, it's actually for our benefit. He doesn't need it, but he wants us to experience contentment. Can we just be content? We don't need more.

The last command, and then we'll move on to Jesus, is God commands the people to practice the Sabbath. He said to let the land rest in the seventh year and observe the Sabbath day. So here's the test. We're called to trust God enough to give ourselves and others a chance to rest and flourish. God invites us to rest, trusting him as the source of everything we need.

Now, here's the deal. Every seventh year, they weren't allowed to plow the field or to sow seed at the beginning of the year. Therefore, by the end of the year, they had no expectations of a great harvest. Can you imagine that? How radical of a command that is. Why would God start a nation by telling them every seventh year not to sow seed into the ground? In fact, the command was, "Hey, whatever the land produces naturally is going to be for you." Why would God do that? For three reasons.

God was going to prove that the land he was giving them could produce enough fruit on its own. It was a bountiful land. Secondly, he wanted to remind them that he was their source. He was their sustenance, not their hard work, not their brilliance,

not their land, and not their seed. He was teaching them that he would provide naturally for them. God was testing them in the areas that mattered most to them in their heart.

Lastly, he was teaching them confidence in divine providence. I'm going to tell you a quick story. Last year, our ministry was ending with a deficit, and I like to share numbers because it only builds faith. We were having a deficit of \$230,000. No one knew that number except our team. A woman who had come to our gala in October of last year couldn't even afford a ticket to our gala. She asked for a free ticket, and I thought to myself, "Well, if I have to give her a free ticket, she probably doesn't have money to give." That's how I naturally think. But we gave it anyway because we wanted to be generous and fill the table.

She didn't even have a hundred bucks in October, but on December 23, with only seven or eight days left of the year, we had this deficit looming over our heads. I'm trying to make adjustments to the ministry for the next year, and we get a call from that same woman. She's not a woman of great affluence. She's not a woman that we would expect it from. She says, "I had a dream. Does the number 230 mean anything to you?" I get goosebumps just talking about it. It's all proven by email. I said, "Yes, our deficit is \$230,000. And she says, "I will wire the funds this week." She said, "I sat at the gala. I didn't even have a \$100. I told God that if he gave me this deal (a huge real estate deal in Russian Hill in San Francisco), I promise whatever you ask of me, I'll give it. And she did it! I said, "Young lady (She was younger than me), this is why God commands a Sabbath. Because it's not your work, it's not your marketing strategy. God wanted to test your heart to see if you were content."

Do you trust him? Do you believe in divine providence? Some of you are working yourselves to the bone every day, thinking it's your wisdom and intellect when you need to take a Sabbath and trust God for his natural provision. God's real, folks. Don't treat the Bible like it's fake or a fairy tale. Don't treat God as if he is invisible or some grandfather in the sky who's not intricately involved in our lives. You need to get your faith tested today. I can say this because we are not recipients of the Christmas offering this year, but giving is the number one way to test God.

In fact, there's no other way to test God except, as Malachi says, test me in this—give. Is it because God has need? No, he knows our hearts. We love money. We love, not even money, but security. We love autonomy. We love not having a boss and being able to do whatever we want, and yet God says, "I want all those things in your heart because it isn't healthy for your soul."

So here's the deal. God gives all these commands, and that was just four of them right there, but the law that he gave, and those commands that he gave didn't really have any power to change their heart. The law was a babysitter.

We have four kids, and when we hire a babysitter to come watch the kids, the babysitter doesn't have any real authority, and our kids know it. They test the boundaries; they do things they know they're not supposed to do. Because the babysitter, at the end of the day, is just making sure the kids don't die and keeps the house from burning down. The rest we can figure out when we get home. We'll have to discipline whoever we need to when we get home. The babysitter is just a temporary placeholder.

The law is exactly that. God wanted to transform people's hearts, but that wasn't going to happen until Jesus arrived. Jesus is the one that's going to actually transform people. But in the meantime, he put this babysitter in a place called The Law with all these commands because he just needed to hold it together. But we all know that The Law can reveal sin, however, it does not empower people to change their hearts. So, ultimately, all roads point to Jesus.

After that there is Malachi and 400 years of silence, and then Jesus shows up on the scene—the New Testament.

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. Galatians 3:23-25

Trying to obey every single one of those laws was not sustainable. You can only try to white-knuckle your faith for so long. The best of us can be good for a week, a month, maybe even a year, but eventually, we fail because we can't depend on our own human effort.

At some point, we must come to the grips of the fact that we actually need help. We need a savior. And that brings us to Jesus. This is how God transforms. Christianity is not just difficult, folks. Christianity is impossible. You can't do it. It's humanly impossible, but by God. It is very possible through his Spirit.

John 1:17 tells us how God transforms. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Jesus shows up with a different type of introduction to who he is. He says, "Grace and truth are how we're going to fulfill the law." Jesus fulfills the law completely. He empowers us with grace and truth by his Spirit so that we can live a righteous life. So, Jesus introduces a new and better way.

The last analogy I will use is my wife and I going on a date. We go on a date, and the house is a mess. The kids are running everywhere. We have instructions for them, but our reservation is in 20 minutes, and it's a 25-minute drive. So we don't have time to gather them all and tell them all the instructions we have in our hearts. We end up basically shouting at the door, "Just love each other!" And then we shut the door. Because if they just love each

other, then they will do the things that we would, and I feel it is the same way with Jesus.

Not that God's in a hurry or anything, but there are too many laws to follow. And there are too many issues in our hearts. So basically, Jesus says, "Let me just summarize this for you."

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:37-40

If we truly love God, we will truly love one another in the way that he loves us. This is how God forms us. He teaches us. He teaches us using the Israelites as an example. He teaches us ultimately by his heart, character, and nature. Ultimately, he tests us. He sees that there are some issues in our hearts, and he wants to form us into the image of his Son, Jesus. So he tests us in those areas. Ultimately, he transforms us through Jesus, through his grace and truth.

I want to close with this benediction,

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14.